Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 16

Crescent Moon

Chapter: 106

The Confusion?

Karly- I got Miss. Cammy girl award, you voted, and I won! ≈ Past remembers of Karly… ≈

2016- Boys today feel that feeling is humping! Olivia always feels absent-minded after the kids come home from school and see her husband after a long hard day at work. She forgets everything about her day when seeing them, it’s the highlight of her day. Even though their day is about to

end hers is about to start, she races off without even a hug. Yet that's just me- I have a hectic life. 'Well?' she prompted. She had wanted to save the news, to torture her by not telling, but he had to talk.

~*~

I read a book that had the first chapter like this- and it oh so reminds me of life and how it is becoming. 2021- 'It was a yearning to burn.' The computers and robots have taken over the world, nobody needs to read any of that shit, or think. Everything is at our

fingertips with cell phones, I- pads, and PC's, without looking through old dusty pages, plus its agents the law to think for yourself, and read any books. We burn books like most have the burning itch to have unpredicted sex. They were dragging the two women; we saw last night by the hair. I don’t want to look, I didn’t want to stare, and I just acted like I didn’t care. Both girls were completely bare. Their lives were over. It seemed so unfair.

A girl without a name just a number of hers- I looked at my

girlfriend and said and said- we just so two hookers getting whacked and jacked. She said- yeah, I no let’s get in the house before they get any ideas about us. There was a thump and a bump in the night, and not the kind of thump and bump you want or want to feel and hear. Honey- hon wake up; I think there is someone in the house! Go and see it!

Wh-a- what? I looked and there was someone at the foot of the bed!

Blood dripping, from her chest, she is scared to look down yet does it

anyway. She was thrown around the room by something dark. It wasn't a woman yet; it was a thing it wasn't anything but unfairness. It was unlike anything she had ever seen. But what was it? No face, no name, nobody... what could it be, and what does it want with me? A flash of lightning appeared in the sky, letting her see the gigantic outline of the grim reaper is what I got by them! Doing exercise helps to boost the power energy nevertheless, she could not boost it enough, not enough to escape from the... Things. It was

sucking the life out of her with its dark back lips. Slowly closing her eyes, she was with me, in my mind. Yet never alive after that day.

Nothing but impressions of life…

~*~

Start: 1941- Grandpas Natalie story- he'd remember… been fresh out of high school not a day over seventeen. I had five cents to my name, I was still living at home, but not for long. I was a virgin, to the world! I

never saw anything other than farmland. I didn't know what I was in for. Yet I had to go... Hitler was taking over, killing babies, and baring them alive of all things. I will never forget the sounds of the troop train steaming through, dropping off more maggots like me to kill the Nazis'.

Knowing that ninety percent of them would not make it back home. I never thought I would live this long, and I never thought young-ins would doubt the war and the Holocaust.

I have seen men, women, and kids being lined up on their knees and shot in the back of the head, for no reason at all. It’s incredible, tragic, and despicable, how one man’s loathing can start so much destruction. I do believe that history is going to repeat; it’s just a matter of time. I just hope I can fish this story with you all before I am fished myself. He had to share it with someone. He put the plate down, came into the living room, and sat on the couch, which meant that all there was more yet he passed midline.

As I wake alone this morning, I miss the feeling of last night the softness of the sheets between my thighs. I look around the room and nothing has changed, she still sleeps next to me, yet she can't see me. Yet I see her, and in a way, I think she can feel me there, yet I am not quite sure... I have been gone for so long now I don't think she even remembers what it’s like to be with me as we were oh so long ago. It's like I was never there, but I was there at one time holding her, I'm still there, yet I ask not... I would love

to be alive, once more. I could talk to him now, yet I don't want to, for being meanie as she said to me!

He and Diana had nicknamed the Butt. 'It was a bust,' he said. 'Cops came the night of this party.' She watched him carefully.

'Are you sure you want to do this, Marcel?' she said unobtrusively. 'Come on, Diana.' He was annoyed that she'd even asked. He hoven on her legs into his lap. The message was in order on the back butt and in-between her, the only thing that would keep them

from total atrophy, and he still insisted on working her calves every day, even though she’d been saying for a long time that it was useless.

Diana, she had seen a few or more different doctors. And she’d been going to physical therapy for well over a year now. But there’d been no change. No improvement. She’d never walk again. Come on, honey, let's get you ready for bed. I was 13 at the time. I am no special your girl here, just a collective girl here doing a thing as I should, thinking of boys and rubbing

myself on them in my thoughts at night. I read, I think, I even poop too, throw girls are not allowed to say that right, not in these times. All the way with sweet and common girly thoughts. I've led a common little life. There is no testimonial dedication to me or for me, yet I may be dying of something bad, I can say. Plus, my name Dinia will soon be unable to be remembered by all that was of the past days. But in single deference, I thrived as magnificently as anyone who ever lived a young dumb yet cute life.

Looking good, girl. As I walk the halls of this big creepy place. ‘I feel okay today.’ Yours truly here feels that she loved another boy with all my heart, and soul body, and mind. My soul and for me, that has always been enough to give to him if that would be his wish.

How's it feeling and doing, hunnie- bunnies? Going to kick it- I keep trying to die, but they won't let me say I am so stinking cute. Well, you can't have everything even if it’s fading or living without pain on both.

Immense day today.

You say that every day, with the cutest smile of your little blond-haired blue-eyed face, you little angel. It's a lovely day outside. Let's take a walk, outside of today, We, don't think so, you’re not able to- at all- yet. (Wishful thinking) Well, we've got to get you out of this room. Come on now, honey goes to the playroom and does coloring and things like that. Some fresh air is what I want! Grrrr!

Chapter: 107

fixable

Karly- Video of me running around the room nude ≈ Past remembers of Karly… ≈ The delusions?

It’s all good. I do what I always do, no compacts, -Good morning. Me- I am so sad and sorry at this point of my beginnings of my young little life, it's not a good day, to be me I want to play and dance and sing and do girl little cute-z things like painting my toenail to match my Paullieger-ie ones. I have a long sunn-ie dress and not as much hair as I did, but it's fixable if I work for it.

OUTSIDE??? I asked if she said- baby-girl- I don't think it can happen. Nurse says- she's up for anything.

Chapter: 108

Ciao

Karly- Photo of me sucking one-off… my dildo that is, for the show ≈

Past remembers of Karly… ≈ The girl?

Hello? (Boy) I like him, he's-a funny and handsome. This is me! doors fly open as she runs and stops runs and stops looking in at the dying kids in

their rooms and beds, older boy Saved-he comes to read to you. Read a kiddie story of hope and love and goo-goo-ness, with unicorns and ponies? Yeah-No that pain starts within me and I feel as if I had to run to the bathroom to not keep it down. The treatments are talking to me; I don't know if this is a good thing-ie. Oh, come on, back to bed, and sleep this off, it goes in OUCH-ies, and her sweet little light goes out.

Ahh… snoring, yet one old Betty said- All right now, that keeps her away for three hours.

(Noon)

Where did we leave off? In the story… Oh, yeah, yeah, here it is- baby. It was the night of the carnival, a news story this time, I knew yet I didn’t remember it, I lost something I can feel yet they didn't tell me anything so I pulled out what I can, yet that is not much being my age. ‘Daved, was there with his friends, and Maraca.’ -Daved?

-That's where both met- them met... It was at the time and date of September- 19th of 14, Dinia was nine years old or so. (Girl) She has the same name as me.

See then there at the park- groundwater squirting game: Little girl wins a prize. He tried to get her something yet epic fail! -Foo-ie! I watched that off so hard, no dangling here. -Thank you for playing the boy. Hah, you're really funny. I am a man here, not a boy. Man, I clobbered, it’s all good she bears hugged him for

being just him and that was some time being, cute yet very dumb for the acting of dumbness. I bet that thing, Yakie- funny it didn’t come off, oh that that thing. I'm telling you I did baby; these games are rigged.

Chapter: 109

Time to turn in

The span?

Nighttime before bedtime, Hello, it was him I kind of remember some of the stories now, that he said earlier… How are you, good- feeling

good?  Howdy, what's your name, U-NO it baby think- hard …???... I don’t think I do- and story time starts for her, as she thinks on. Footstep comes right up here now. Over the knob, certainly. Whoa.

Yeah, singing it out in a hum-

-Who's this girl with Maraca?

-Her name's Dinia Samilton.

She's here for the summer with her family.

Dad's is the poorest around, yet she has a cute right good butt for you.

Ha- funny then why haven’t you been with her yet?

Walked away to go see this girl.

-Hello, Paullie!

-Hi, honey.

Look, I won you a prize, he rips one down from the mouse game as she walks towards him.

That woman was P-O-ed, at the game, yet they walked off with one arm wrapped around.

Paullie- oh, thank you! She giggled without thinking of him and she ran around like the mouse on the wheel of the game.

Osha! A bear- cute- Love! He said Yeah, -sure- kiss me! They did… Hey great, huh I look at Daved like I hooked her?

Chapter: 110

Trendy

What is happening?

Hey Dinia, you want some cotton candy baby-girl? - Umm, okay

honey. That would be so much fun if your pants’, someone. Sure, look down there… GOD keep it in there I don’t want to see it, she said. You only get one chance, teenager. You want to dance with me or ride with me, or on me, or something like that?

I'm Daved Talhhoun.

SO-o?

-So, it's nice to meet you.

-Dinia, who is this guy?

-I don't know, Daved Talhhoun.

-I would like to take you out.

-Friend! Do you mind?

You can't sit more than two people in a chair, Daved.

Go out?

-No.

-Why not?

-CUZ- I don't want to.

David, she's with us, so don’t chase her away with your dumbness, and crap.

Hey Dinia, you want to ride the merry-go-round?

Up down, up-down, Up Down-

they went their love life would go.

-I'd love to sugggggerrrr.

They are kissing and feeling each other out in the tornal of love.

-All right the boy said in the 1st seat.

Love is all we need right- the book closes for the night as she falls asleep on him.

(Boy) walks out of the room kissing her forehead and says I never forget you as you did with me, yet love and luck don’t always go hand and hand.

Chapter: 111

Collective

Photos of my sis, online to at her age, asking like a slut, all over me

and my friends. It shows her puss and running come, shot.

When and why?

Reason with me. Please Help me. - Daved Talhhoun.

-What?

Works down at the McDonald's with Paullie age seventeen.

Oh... Did you see he was standing like that god do you think it’s- like- oh?

Run up- he dad- like not even one inch away from her face? GOD- what do you want from me? She said not happy, yeah, I saw, said the girlfriend, that’s Daved, though. Always doing the crazies, are you at all surprised, not at all I like it yet I don’t, we'll see, maybe, I don’t know yet, I girl what can I say.

He even came over to you, like was he going to kiss you and not even know your name first.

Sweet but creepy!

I think he likes you, she said with delight. Yeah, my dad would too. I think nah- for now anyway. Hey what... jerk... as he pulled my hair, saying I was cute. Get off me, I said as he was all wrapped around me going for it all. God older boy- Don't touch me. -Hey! I love you, girl, without a name! - Well, I... ugh! HUM, I thought about him and what I saw there. What are you doing tonight? Hey, you can't do that as she runs off the merry-go-round! As she was there, he almost fell on his tooshie, I'll pay you when I get off, Dan.

-He asked you out-

Yes, he did- I like him- eyes rolled dreamily, both hands flew up on her reading cheeks. Okay, Dan, I'll get-it- oh- off, all right. Get off, Daved, you need to come…. (Girls-What?) Award stop in his yelling words- 'OFF' as it spins around, you need to come-what...? Off. He tripped you're going to kill yourself for her boy!

Daved, cut it out, boy. Now, will you go out with me as he hopped on my hose-ie?

What the freak? - No?

Hey boy, she just told you.

It keeps going around. Rings being tossed in the mouth of the clown.

Lean into it so you don’t fall off, it goes, fast.

Why not?

I don't know you at all, and because I don't want to. You don’t need to know me to be a 1st date girl. How else do you get to know someone if you don’t try first- dates, go by what your friends say?

Daved!

Come again? Would you- GO!

NO! He said.

Girl- Well, you leave me no other choice then. Oh, my God gets it in your head and not that one I don’t want it.

I'm not kidding, I am falling for you.

Daved, stop misleading around.

-What are you doing?

-I'm going to ask you one more time, he kisses her on the cheek, from behind. Will you... NOW as he gets up on her and the house, doing things I can say, yet think like a boy. Will you go out with me? Daved, you best come on and stop it.

Girlfriend next one over… my leg is slipping. Then get down and off, you- idiot. That way I am doing if she says- yes. Not until she decides. ‘Ah, go on out with him, baby, ' said some old dude in the next row.’ All right, all right, her and goes down his undies,

and then see feel it and push him off, I'll go out with you. She knew it was all love she was feeling too. It was up to my butt so- yeah- feel in the blanks here.

Chapter: 112

Who and then what?

What?

Who?

When?

Why?

They?

It?

Some?

Doing it?

No, don't do me any favors if you say yes, he spun out on the floor of the ride.

No, no. Do I want to, yes?

Do you want to?

Did she say Sucking- yes!

Do you want to?

Yes!

Say it again.

I want to go out with you- now.

Say it again.

I want to go out with you.

All right, all right God keep it in your pants!

We’ll go out.

You think you're so clever, do you not?

Daved, you- idiot! She said

She remembers my name- yes!

Girlfriend- That wasn't funny, nope, it's okay hun, I'll take care of this boy soon.

Girl asked- on her deathbed- I remember the girl from the Carnival, right… she was my friend, right?

Do you remember me? I asked with wandering thoughts- of hope.

Yeah, sure, the boy that reads to me, not the boy- what was he called- Mr. Bonner, was it? He looked pickled. How could I overlook the speculations of me wondering though-

age?  I wanted to clear that up with you, for the reason that I'm categorically regretful about that all. It remained an imprudent thing to do... on that ride, to talk to somebody. But then again, I had god was saying she was my baby angel sent from the heavens. I had to see I could get her naked before the night was over. To be next to you. I was being so pulled from you. Um... oh, what a saying here, it’s nice, so nice! Do you use that on all the barbs?

-No, not all just you hun.

-Right, you’re dumb.

I saw you all rubbed up to your little girlie-friend what's her name with the brown hair and green eyes.

-What are you doing tonight?

-Could you repeat that? Go out tomorrow night?

What do you say, baby? What about this weekend, say at a hotel or whatever?

I know what you want. I don't give that to boys.

- Why?

Our date then?

Maybe- she walked away- skipping, and humming show tunes.

I didn't even say; I would go on that date with you.

The date that you agreed to go on with me.

No...!

Yes, you promised.

You pledged, and you swore it did not.

Sounds good, I speculate the thoughts of yes or no: Yeah for you would have killed me with it behind me if not. I changed my mind over time to yes or no, I have to see, maybe? Look, I know you get some dirty boys coming up to you on the street doing crazy things... I don't know him. Why act as if I do? You don't know me by now don’t you, I know me and that’s good enough, right?

Chapter: 113

Trinkets

Who did what?

Plus, when I see something that I like, I gotta love it to see the small-town charms- ha... I love it. I go... I mean, I go crazy for it. Okay, what are you speaking of? Well, you, see into me, I feel, that you do. Oh, you're good at this and you. What the Hell-? You're so moral. Certainly not. No, you're getting me wrong. You have it all now, yet not me. But you- You're something ain't you. You are you ain't nothing bad. You're whimsical, fanciful, unusual, imaginative, original, creative, and

quirky, and I would even give you impulsive and capricious.

Hugh?

I'm not.

You’re so stupid, I think I like that…

Chapter: 114

Emotional

The good and the bad- you are so-o goooood, I'm mesmerized. I'm not frequently like this, I'm sorry. You make me dumb feeling and acting.

Uh-oh, oh my- like- yes, you are.

I can be amusing if you want... thoughtful, uh, smart, um, illogical, and courageous. And uh... I can be light on my feet. I could be your all and wonder, and magical, whatever you want. You just tell me what you want me to be and I do that- love. I'll be that for you forever and ever never letting go of you to the day you or me, is not around to say- I love you.

You're CUTELY dumb and love me I see that. OKAY! You win, not

smart- I could be that for you too. Come on, let’s go for this date, you want as bad as me.

What's it going to hurt if we do things after and now? Umm... ah- unh- I don't think as a result so maybe it’s okay if I am like you. Fine, what can I do to change your mind?

Dinia, you remember- Daved, don't you? The move adds to start with supposition- You'll total and get something out. You unquestionable she's coming for it hard? Lessen, chum,

it's all set up. We are meeting her for the late show tonight so back off her.

Look... what did… I tell you what? Come on now and see this movie picture.

Oh, my goodness, it's bad, his hand on mine… I feel more to come. What a happenstance she felt! Kissing him with popcorn, and the taste of butter, and Pepsi, I need to talk to you for a second. He's here! Him sitting on my hand, and the other way around, Yes, I remember- Yah.

Chapter: 115

Levels

The tell of tells- the tale of my butt plug ha! I'm- cute no?

-Come here.

-Paullie!

-Hi.

-You look great.

-Hello.

-It's nice to see you yet again.

-You too.

-Aw, thanks.

You look great and feel good next to me. She is kissing my ear, saying sweet nothings.

You do look great. You look great.

And I know I look great, said Paullie so could we please go see this movie now and hush up? The show's about to start. After you, he asked for a kiss on the lips. You come back here, baby. You ain't going to catch me, she

runs for the water’s edge and prattled-boats.

Swans all-round them as they kiss in the sunshine, next to the old steam train puffing down next to the oak trees and picnic tables.

See her as she runs, wild and carefree, in stupid love, with so poor boy.

I'm supposed to catch you! Kiss, kiss, kiss, lip bite, eyes tight, and lashes long on his cheeks. I'm faster than you. ‘Nah- you- aint.’ ‘You- aint-

you- aint- you ant!!! Nope, No!’ I am wet for you know, just drenched with the water on the edge.

I'll get you, baby girl! I'm going to get... Here I come! Let me love you. You better run fast! And then met slowly in a hug, run and it's falling in love again being apart for that long. Park and outlying past them all that looked passed all the rides too. Love after, after falling madly in love, love, love, la- love. The big wheel in the sky is lighting as fireworks off above and inward. Wait for me, baby girl- I see

you there, never about where they are, never- ever apart- I would even sleep with me in the night for I said I was scared, and ran in his bed, held tightly.

(Back on the first date)

Want to walk with me to my house? He did old ways I said- mom will love you for this. Her- what happened? …In that movie? We didn’t even see it. I could not even tell you for sure. Here you go. Thank you for this night we didn’t even kiss at the door mom was looking so yeah. What are you guys

doing now and then? We giggled and did say anything but the truth.

Even if I was opened up to him now.

Yeah, what's going on you too? Yeah, is that all...

....???....

Just a and movie no more no less- um she now by the look on my face, and the glow your un-flow-her-ed-ness. Mom passed a week later of what I have. Do you guys feel it for each other? Yes- yes- we do.

Do you-ah Love each other? Yes- I love him! I love her too. Oh, I get it. You guys do love each other, THEN HUN? Don't do anything you’re going to regret I wouldn't do. Unacceptable, goodbye. All right, all right. Mmm...

That was fun. We are going to do it again. Mm-hmm. I haven't seen a movie in ages. Really? Huh-uh. Not meanwhile I was a little kid. Pardon?

Nope-ie, I, uh...what?

I'm busy, you know, I don't have that much time don’t ya- see. Are

you busy? hmm- Mm- I have a very stern agenda.

My days are all planned out even back then, I had to deal with this crap. I get up in the morning... banquet, school day, get it in- here- work on homework here, play some all alone, reading time, bath time and sleep time and do it all over and over and over and over and over and over and over. Math, English tutor, lunch at some point if I can hold it down, music lessons- piano lesson, and that about all they will like me do, TV. It is nice when

it works also. And after dinner and blowing it all over- I spend time with my family, for three hours before they go home, and I stay here all alone in this glowing white and cold room, next to my bedmate Sam.

She does do or say much she has a week to live and she is five years old.

And then l… I catch up on some reading, she is sawing logs! Wow, stop breathing- um I think about that one hard and then say Nah- don’t do that.

Oh, Mom and Daddy see you soon pull through one more day baby.

We decided to pull the plug- so she would not suffer- age ten.

We all gather around to see her.  Everything is over… they look down on the life she never had- yet she has a sketchbook of her short life here. No, not everything is readable- however, it's all there in her handwriting. But the important thing is she was remembered for her. And then everything else, she was not. And that way youth and innocence with young

love mixed in. free- and wild to see life fad fast. You get to decide all by yourself to live on or let go? She didn’t we did- the hardest thing a dad has to do is she, someone, you love to go- before you. It had to be I would say- it had to be this way. I don’t get it either.

Why? God- or whomever why make the plan of killing sweet little kids? Why the hell do you want to do this to me- why? Mom- she never did stop crying. It's been four years now.

I'll always think of you that way. I'll pull you in the morning sun and when the night is new...

I'll be looking at the moon and think of you…

But the first time I ever saw your face… The first time I ever saw your face I'll be seeing you.

Morning, Mr. Talhhoun.

Mr. Talhhoun? Call Dr. Mandite Von and USC, okay? I've got no, I got no pulse anymore- she said. I've got nothing to say just how I love

you and you feel that even now with things gone like even if your heart is new it feels the same to me and you.

Let them know we are in full arrest.

Call me- on my cell if you can, if you can this evening, I see you tomorrow if I can and you can. All right, we will do this if we can. We talked about this. It's all right now to sleep, and rest now think about your life and how it was. Come on, come on, sweetie. Okay, yes, come on, let's go. Time to

go- It's okay, baby, come on. You know it is.

Just try it not to get her over happy she needs rest not a boyfriend right now, said mom.

Oh, Mr. Talhhoun, you came to see her.

Welcome back, the baby girl sees that you want it through all that. How do you feel? Paulie. Apt as a swindle. Where are you going girl at the stand asked? I was just taking a walk, thinking about how- I can't sleep

without her. Fine, you know you're not supposed to, it's against the rules.

Yeah, I know. You weren't going for a walk, where you? You were going to see Miss Dinia again wasn’t yah. I just got out of the hospital and I miss her you see.

Mr. Talhhoun, I'm sorry you can be coming in out of her room like that at night, but I can't let you see her tonight. Here and now you're going to have to go back to your room. As for me, I'm going to go downstairs and get myself a cup of coffee. I won't be back

to check on you for a while, so don't do anything foolish- I want to go to do that- I just want to see him if I can-

Hi.

Daved.

Daved.

Hi, Baby girl. I'm sorry I haven't been able to be here to read to you.

I didn't know what to do. I was frightened you were not ever coming back to my love. I'll continuously come

back. What's going to happen when I can't remember anything to any further extent? What will you do? I'll be here always and ever. I'll never- ever leave you. I need to ask you something. What is it, Baby girl? Do you think that our love can make marvels? Sure, I do the same. That's what conveys you back to me each time. Do you think our love could take us away together even if I go away from you? I think our love can do something we want it to.

I love you.

- I love you, Dinia.

Good night.

- Good night.

I'll be seeing you there soon.

I want to show you something the boy said I have. It was hers.

- Daved, what are you doing?

As the pages started to show and he read out- to them as he did with her-

day in and day out. -What now? She loves to paint.

Yeah? -Mm-hmm. Huh. Most of the time, I have all these drawings shown in here and look over them before seeing her do them going back to the time she did them.

Thoughts bouncing around in my head. Are you okay? Why are you crying? It’s all good, I said whipping them away.

(Memory)

Do you want to dance with me? Now? Sure. -Mm-hmm. Is the song playing in the background? -Mm-hmm.

I want to fly like a colorful bird- so I don’t have to be here and see the world until then and I rush over their heads, are you going to be one-two? If you're a birdie, I'm a birdie. Come on, darling, don’t do this to yourself- What are you doing? You need to hear this all there is the thing you don’t know about us. Don't. Don't! Okay then if you insist. Here we go, reading easily- Okay, okay. We were crazy about each other. Yah

we know- Okay, Daddy- Oh, and Daddy I love him- she said here in her book quoting her life.

I want to meet her in heaven now. This young man is not going to make it.

Heartbroken he is… Okay. I am okay… Nope… he ain't. Good night, Daddy, as she ran to me and left you for a night out- of fun and games.

Good night first kisses we had- like- like- like- do you see this?

Oh, that's lovely, dear. Her dream was like a movie- I want a big old porch that wraps around the walkway and a big old entire into the house. We can drink sugary soda and candy... nonstop. Big windows and open doors to watch the sun go down, no shades, like here. Do you promise? This for me? Hmm- Mm, I promise. Yeah! -Where are you going? Is something happening to me?

Here...

Always next to you. Wow… This is the part you all need to hear for sure.

What that dear? Ha-hum? She said- make love to me. Daved. -Yeah?

The old-rick-a-t-ie Covered Bridge I waited for her to say when and where.

Did she say- Daved? Okay, I want you? I want you to- And It all happened… all and everything, which makes a girl a woman. And…?

Did…???... you…?

?... Um…? I know I said, the kiss… I want you to make love to me, she asked once more.

So, I did- we did- it was not easy for me- know what I was doing and she did not. She said- you're going to have to walk me through this sex like this, it broke, she feels, so did I the kissing lots. Right.

You, all right? -Yeah, it’s okay- it’s okay. I asked- Did I hurt you? -No, no. Dad said we know… boy we know- it was good she had her magical boyfriend he was you, which was her dying wish, to have love and feel the love. I'm just having a lot of thoughts, of age and things. It’s Okay! I should

go- over this I feel… No, I don't want you to go. I got to think… about what I did here. Come here and talk to us.

You’re not leaving till it’s all been said.

I'm so happy that you did? Um- yes. You got so much ahead of you. Yet not love, he said. It's true… I will never love another girl, at all. I'm not going to have nice things, fancy things, sure but not her… I don’t want to live without it. It's never going to happen for me. Sh-h- boy- stop. It's not in the cards for me, don’t you see it was all ripped away,

like her life, why? Stop it! You're going to die too and we don’t need that on-top. Oh! You know what? I'm going to do it. It's over.

Okay?

What’s over? Come here.

The first time I ever saw her face- was…

He passed away with a broken heart.

(Falling to the floor with a thud.)

Not without a miracle. Despite the daily massages, Daina’s legs were thin, stalky, and pale, like something that would grow on a flower. Unfluctuating as her face had come to be overweight, the flesh of her arms looser, and her legs continued to wither.

Close much...?

Interval

Deceiving my end

Part: 1

Here is something that only a short girl can do…

We- can kiss as I slide upon him as it goes out, and then that makes me able to reach his face to kiss, and I go back in and I have to leave the kiss to get it in me, so each time I go down, we part just for me to come to him to meet his waiting kiss, I have my hand under his head, and I pull him into for the lip lock. Over and over until… and we let it all in and make out for an hour or so.

Finally, today is the day that I am finally saying it. The day that I say for sure that I love Marcel, I am in love with that boy. Sometimes, I reflect that he knew this all along. That they would laugh in my face if I would say it, to him in front of them.

He is- One of the most amazing things that can happen is finding someone who sees everything you are and won't let you be anything less. They see the potential for you. They see endless possibilities. And through their

eyes, you start to see yourself the same way. As someone who matters.

As someone who can make a difference in this world. If you're lucky enough to find this person, never let them go.' 'Hey,' he says, surprised. 'You're not going to sit with me?' I try to keep walking down the aisle, but he grabs my arm. Are you kidding me?

You have to sit with me.' He looks around to see if anybody's listening.

‘You’re my girlfriend.’ I shake him off. ‘We’re breaking up soon, aren’t we? We might as well make it look more realistic.’ When I slide into the seat next to her, Chris is shaking her head at me. ‘What? I couldn’t just let you sit alone. You came here for me, after all.’ I open up my backpack and show her the snacks. ‘See? I bought your favorite things. What do you want to eat first? Gummies or sugar or sugar?’

‘It’s barely even morning,’ she grouses. Then: ‘Hand me the gummies.’

Smiling, I rip open the bag for her. ‘Have as much as you want.’ I stop smiling when I see him get on the bus and sit down in the seat next to me, he wants to be.

‘You did that to him,’ ‘For you!’ Which isn’t true, not really. I think maybe I’m just tired of all this. This in-between-ness of being somebody’s girlfriend but not really. He stretches. But- ‘You can never wholly know anyone, no matter how well you think you do. There will always be some truth about them you don’t ever get to know.’

I stuff a gummy into my mouth and chew, and swallow too hard. I watch Maggie whisper something in Lizzie's ear, and Marcel falls asleep right away just like she said, his head on my shoulder. It's implausible how you can affect someone else so deeply and never know.

Two days before my death-school trip.

(Remembering as he sleeps)

Listen to him and the music in my one ear. Head on my shoulder I say

I love you; I recall that- ‘I enjoyed the hot tub moments.’ ‘I always do- flashback.’  I’m shaking.

Is it true?

I love him!

Things don’t get better just because you want them to. The unwise thing about anger is how people hurt you, and then you let them keep hurting you by being angry about how they originally hurt you. It’s a vicious cycle… Could he be right? It’s interesting how something that comes

so easily to one person can be so impossible for someone else, no one can be everything you want them to be.

The physical attraction that strong is addictive.

As well as knowing what kind of magic isn’t just a fantasy makes me want to find it again. But what about being with someone who makes me a better person? What about sharing my life with someone who adores me as much as I adore him, whom I can always count on, who benefits me to find my way when- I’m lost? I want

deeper connections with the people around me. I need to reach out more. For the reason that not everyone leaves. Every so often if you reach out, the person you’re trying to reach will be right there waiting.

The past doesn't just disappear after it's happened or was it happening to me for you to see? Sometimes amid all your boy drama, you just need a cupcake… like I would love to eat one with him now, both biting at the same time kissing getting on our nose and oddly like that off. He licked me… so-

yeah. It's up to me to create the life I want. He never gives up on who I am or who I could be. He doesn't run away when things get complicated.

Now that I know where this life is going, it's time to decide how I'll get there.

Just when it seems like life is getting good, something always has to come along and ruin it, waiting for my real life to start is no excuse to waste the life I have right now. One of the most amazing things that can happen is finding someone who sees everything

you are and won't let you be anything less. They see the potential for you. They see endless possibilities. And through their eyes, you start to see yourself the same way. As someone who can make a difference in this world. If you're lucky enough to find that person, never let them go.

It used to be extremely common for families to have two parents. They stayed together because that’s what all the other parents did. Now there are so many options, so many different ways to be a family. So

many ways to rip a family apart. But maybe those things are like background noise if you’re from here.

Maybe you have to experience this as a whole new place to appreciate it as I do. The only person I can count on is myself. It's up to me to create the life I want. I can't blame my parents or him or her or she or anyone else for the way things are… I just never stopped believing that what I wanted could be real, seriously, if we stayed inside the lines on everything we’re supposed to

be doing, we wouldn’t get anything done. Know what I mean?

~*~

When I open my back door, Marcel is holding his phone over his head playing ‘Stay with me he put lyrics to my piano.’

‘Happy anniversary,’ he says.

‘You remembered!’ I’ve been wondering if he was going to remember that our first date was one month ago today. He didn’t say anything at school.

So, I didn’t say anything, either. I didn’t want to come off like a total spaz over being together for a month.

Now I’m so happy I didn’t ruin his surprise. I had no idea he was organizing this when he said he wanted to come over tonight. He comes in and kisses me. Still holding his phone over his head. Still playing ‘In Your Eyes.’

‘You imperative,’ I tell him.

‘I don’t rule yet. Maybe I’ll rule when we get to where I’m taking you to celebrate. If you like what we’re doing.’

‘You didn’t have to do all this.’

Marcel hugs me tight. ‘I wanted to make tonight special.’

It’s hard to believe we’ve only been together for one month now. It feels like I’ve known him forever.

In the present day at lunch, we were talking about last Saturday night. We were driving around in Ethan’s car

with no destination in mind. I was supposed to be home in half an hour.

But I was desperately trying to block out the harsh reality of time.

The sex- all the first week…

‘And we got the motel room for safety. You were tired, and we were worried you might fall asleep at the wheel.’ ‘Exactly. Your mom would buy that, right?’

‘As much as your mom would.’ We smirked at each other. Both moms would see right through that scam. He

reached into my lap and held my hand. This was always the worst part of the night when we knew we'd have to go home soon. I wanted to drive around all night. Holding hands in my lap or his. Singing along to the radio. Getting lost down side streets to make out. We're both shocked by how much alone time we want together. Neither of us has ever felt this way before.

Ethan loves having lots of people around. He's a classic extrovert like me. We're both into going out and meeting new people. But nothing

compares to how happy I am when it's just the two of us. A Pearl Jam or maybe STP or some rock song. Ethan started laughing.

'Could you repeat that?' I asked.

'Incomprehensible situation.'

'Try me.'

'How are you so breathtaking?'

'How are you so tremendous?'

‘We’re both geeks at heart. That makes us both splendid and cute-z.’

‘I love our unintelligible awesomeness.’ ‘I love everything about you.’

Stay with me! He said as I looked back on it. He made me melt when he said that. I was melting right into the passenger seat. My bones went soft and my heart swelled, and I couldn’t imagine ever feeling happier than I did right that second. I knew he could see how much I loved him when

he looked into my eyes. We haven’t said ‘I love you!’ to each other yet or did I want to confess that to him or me. But we both know it’s there.

That night in his car feels like it was three weeks ago. Nevertheless, it was only three days ago. When we’re together, time dilates and stretches in mysterious ways. It’s like we enter our private universe. Expressly when we are alone.

Specifically, when we’re making out.

When he is touching me and kissing me and we are pressed against each other in bed, I never want it to end. I wish we could stay together forever. We usually go to my apartment after school. One minute it will be forever and never-ending to me, and we'll have three whole hours until he has to be home for dinner.

The next thing we know it's after seven. How do hours pass in a space of time that feels like minutes or forever?

~*~

I suspect back in the room, I change into my blarney nighty and put on thick socks. I don't even go wash up. I just turn out the lights and crawl into bed. I can't fall asleep, though. Every time I close my eyes, I see his face. How dare he say I need to grow up? What does he know about anything? As if he's so mature!

But… is he right about me? Do I only like the boys I can never have? I've always known Marcel was out of my reach, yet not out of my hands. I've always known he didn't belong to me.

But tonight, he said he liked me. The thing I've been in suspense for, he said it. So why didn't I just tell him I liked him hindmost when I had the chance? Because I do. I like him back.

Of course, I do. What girl would not fall to him, the most handsome boy of all the handsome boys?

Now that I know him, I know he's so much more than that. I don't want to be afraid anymore. I want to be brave. I want life to start fashionably. I want to fall in love and I want a boy to

fall in love with me back. Formerly I can talk myself out of it, I put on my puffy coat, slip my keycard in my pocket, and head off to the hot tub.

THE HOT TUB IS OVERDUE

the foremost cottage, tucked in the woods on a wooden platform. On the way there, I run into kids with wet hair who are on their way back to their rooms before the time limit set by mom. Curfew is at eleven for me, and it’s already ten fifty-five. There’s not much time left.

~*~

Kellie- I hope Ray is still out there. I don't want to lose my nerve. So, I quicken my pace and that's when I spot him, alone in the hot tub, his head tipped back with his eyes closed. Time is going to pass even faster tonight. I have no idea where Ethan's taking me to celebrate. But something tells me it's going to be romantic. 'In Your Eyes' finishes playing. Ethan smiles in that way he has where his eyes sparkle like I'm the most important person to him. 'Are you prepared?' he asks. Why does it seem like he's asking about more

than just tonight? Ethan won't give me any hints in his car. He even takes a few random turns to fake me out.

Our small town is already shut down for the night. The river, piers, and boats all seem like they're sleeping. I'm surprised when we end up at his house. 'Didn't see that coming,' I say. 'You have no idea… What I go through' No one's home at Ray's house. We go up to his room. Which is filled with candles. Candles in different shapes, sizes, and colors are on every available surface. Candles are on the

windowsills, the dresser, the desk, the shelves, and the night table. There are even some big pillar candles clustered in a corner on the floor. He turns the lights off. He starts lighting candles.

‘Have a seat,’ he says.

‘This might take a while.’

(Romantic only for her) I lie back on

Ray’s big bed and watches him light the candles. I love watching him. One time he fell asleep in my room. I watched him for almost an hour,

memorizing the slope of his nose, the curves of his cheeks, and the shape of his lips. He is the most gorgeous boy I've ever seen. And he picked me… over them all and even my sis that he freaked first, and I have to live with that. How did I get so lucky? After the lights the last candle, Ray grabs his I-Pod.

He lies down next to me. Then he puts one earbud in my ear and the other in his. 'Thanks again for the song last night, you know I wanted it- and you too' he says. 'I loved it.' where my I

love you, I asked him for it and got love yah! I was so nervous about sending Ray ‘Everything’ by Lifehouse.

I have had that song on repeat ever since the day Ethan first asked me out.

To me, it’s Ray’s love song for us. It sounds like him. It feels like him. I love losing myself in the sound of him. I’m so deep in the love haze, I can’t remember what I used to think about before Ray. Last night I was suddenly inspired to share the song with him.

The message I wrote with it said that he’s all I want. He’s all I need.

What we have is amazing.

The second I sent the song, I worried that it was too much. The last thing I want to do is scare him away. Nevertheless, he isn’t a representative boy. He doesn’t get freaked out by strong emotions. And he’s so romantic. ‘Your song inspired me to find one for you,’ Ethan says. Haunting, resonant music starts playing in our earbuds. ‘You’re the Inspiration’ ‘Their music is

beautiful. Just like you.’ Melting- On- The bed.

‘I don’t have the words to tell you how I feel about you. So, I found a song in another language to do it for me. I read that it’s about two people falling in love. How they spend the day together walking around downtown and enjoying being in their world where they understand each other better than anyone ever has before.

It’s called ‘An all right Start.’’ I have to know its love- before I fall!

‘You were being sweet. You’re the sweetest girl I’ve ever known.’

More than your sister, more than 100 girls of the past too. You’re 101 and that right… so right for me.

‘You always out- romantic me. I thought I was being all sweet sending you everything. You’re like, ‘I had to go to a whole other philology to tell you how I feel!’ I put my head on his chest, breathing with him and listening to the music. Ethan slides his fingers through my hair over and over.

‘Excellent,’ Ray says.

‘Yeah- yepper?’

‘I love you- baby-love.’

~*~

I lift my head to look at him. He glows in the candlelight. Just looking at him takes my breath away. ‘I love you, too,’ I tell him. Say it- say it- say it I was thinking over and over- I do this for you. I move that way… (She is more into her then he is her.)

How could it be any better than this? ‘Hi,’ I say, and my voice

resonances into the woods. His eyes fly open. Nervously, he looks over my shoulder.

‘Liv- Jean! What are you doing out here?’ ‘I came to see you,’ I say, and my breath comes out in white puffs. I start taking off my boots and socks. My hands are shaking, and not because it’s cold. I’m nervous. ‘Uh... what are you doing?’ Marcel’s looking at me like I’m senseless.

~*~

‘I’m getting in!’ Shivering, I unzip my puffy coat and set it on the bench. Steam is rising out of the water. I dip my feet in and sit down on the edge of the hot tub. It’s hotter than a bath, but it feels nice. Marcel’s still watching me warily.

My heart is sprinting out of control and it’s difficult to look him in the eyes. I’ve never been so scared in my life. ‘That thing you brought up earlier... you caught me off guard, so I didn’t know what to say. But ... well, I like you too.’ It comes out so fumbling

and uncertain, and I wish I could start over and say it smoothly and confidently. I try again, louder. ‘I like it! Silly!

He blinks, and he looks so young all of a sudden. ‘I don’t understand you girls. I think I have you figured out, and then- and then… then, I hold my breath as I wait for him to speak. I’m so nervous; I keep swallowing soft and hard, and it sounds loud to my ears. Even my breathing sounds loud, even my heartbeat.

His pupils are dilated. He's looking at me so hard. He’s staring at me like he’s never seen me before. ‘As well as then I do not know.’

I think I stop breathing when I hear him say ‘I don’t know.’ Did I screw things up that badly that now he doesn’t know? It can’t be over, not when I finally found my courage. I can’t let it be.

My heart is pounding like a million trillion beats a minute as I scoot closer to him. I bend my head down and press my lips against his, and I feel his

jars some in surprise. Besides, then he's kissing me back, openmouthed, soft-tipped, kissing me back, and at first, I'm nervous, but then he puts his hand on the back of my head, and he reassuringly strokes my hair, and I'm not so nervous anymore. It's a good thing I'm sitting down on this ledge because I am weak in the knees. He pulls me into the water so I'm sitting in the hot tub too, and my nightgown is soaked now but I don't care. I don't care about anything. I never knew kissing could be this awesome.

My arms are at my sides, so the Jets won't make my skirt fly up. Marcel's holding my face in his hands, kissing me. 'Are you okay?' he whispers. His voice is different: it's ragged and imperative and susceptible somehow. He doesn't sound like he and I know; he is not smooth or bored or amused.

The way he's looking at me right now, I know he would do anything I asked, and that's a strange and powerful feeling. I wind my arms around his neck. I like the smell of

chlorine on his skin. He smells like a pool, summer, and vacations. It's not like in the movies. It's better because it's real. 'Touch my hair again,' I tell him, and the corners of his mouth turn up. I lean into him and kiss him.

He starts to run his fingers through my hair, and it feels so nice I can't think straight.

It's better than getting my hair washed at the salon. I move my hands down his back and along his spine, and he shivers and pulls me closer. A boy's back feels so different than a girl's back

more muscular, more solid somehow. In between kisses, he says, ‘It’s a past curfew. We should go back inside.’

‘I don’t want to,’ I say. All I want is to stay and be here, with him, at this moment. ‘Me either, but I don’t want you to get in trouble,’ Ray says. He looks worried, which is so sweet.

Softly, I touch his cheek with the back of my hand. It’s smooth. I could look at his face for hours, it’s so beautiful- oh so- and lovely. Then I stand up, and immediately I’m shivering. I start wringing the water

out of my nightgown, and he jumps out of the hot tub and gets his towel, which he wraps around my shoulders. Then he gives me his hand and I step out, teeth chattering. He starts drying me off with the towel, my arms, and my legs. I sit down to put on my socks and boots.

He puts my coat on me last. He zips me right in. Then we run back inside the lodge. Beforehand he goes to the boys' side and I go to the girls' side, I kiss him one more time and I feel like I'm flying.

Part: 2

Butt up in the air pic! ≈ Past remembers of Karly… ≈

WHEN I SEE he is on the bus the next morning, he's standing around with all his lacrosse friends, and at first, I feel shy and nervous, but then he sees me, and his face breaks into a grin. 'He says, so I go to him and he throws my tote over his shoulder. In my ear he says, 'You're sitting with me, right?'

I nod and look up sweet wetly. I am so short next to him that his hip is where my face is- I don't have to get on

my knee's girls! As we make our way onto the bus, somebody wolf whistles. It seems like people are staring at us, and at first, I think it’s just my imagination, but then I see Genevieve look right at me and whisper to Emily Assbaum. It sends a chill down my spine.

‘Genevieve keeps staring at me,’ I whisper to Marcel.

‘It’s because you’re so adorably quirky,’ he says, and he rests his hands on my shoulders and kisses me on the cheek, and I forget all about Genevieve.

Ray and I sit in the middle of the bus with Gabe and the lacrosse guys. I wave to Tom, so she'll sit with us, but she's cozies with Chad Dickhard. I haven't had a chance to tell her about last night. When I got back to the room, she was already asleep. This morning, we both overslept and there wasn't time. I'll tell her all about it later. But, for now, it's kind of nice that Ray and I are the only ones who know about it. The way down the mountain, I share my sweet sugary sticks with the boys and we play a heated round of

Uno, which I also bought. An hour into the trip, we stop at a rest-stop dinner for breakfast. I eat a cinnamon bun, and under the table Ray, and I hold hands.

~*~

I go to use the bathroom, and there is Genevieve, alone, applying lip gloss with a little brush. I step into the stall to pee and hope she'll be gone by the time I come out, but she's still there. I wash my hands quickly, and then she says, 'Did you know that when we were kids, I used to wish I was you?'

I freeze…

Genevieve snaps her compact shut. ‘I used to wish your dad was my dad and Margot and Kitty were my sisters. I loved coming over to your house. I would hope and pray that you would invite me to the sleepover.

Part: 3

(Us- in music trips and class)

‘What key is this in?’ he asks.

‘B- Flat,’ I tell him sweetly.

‘My pages are messed up.’ I make some notations on his sheet music with a pencil. ‘Let’s hit it,’ Tom says from behind the drums. Stefan is only happy when he’s behind the drums.

Tom, Killie, and Jenna furer are Marcel’s bandmates. Those guys’ high school days are behind them.

Now they’re working random jobs while waiting for the band to get mega-famous. Their band is

Invincible. Marcel plays bass and Seath rocks the keyboard. Along with his best friend, Megan, these guys our closest…

~*~

Shy- I hated being at home with my dad.' Haltingly, I say, 'I-I didn't know that. I used to like going to your house because your mom was so nice to me.'

'She liked you,' Maddie says.

I screw up all my courage and I ask, ‘So why did you stop being friends with me?’

Maddie narrows her eyes at me.

‘You don’t know?’

‘No!’

‘You kissed Ray that day at my house in seventh grade. You knew I liked him, but you kissed him anyway.’ I recoil, and she remains. ‘I always knew your goody-goody act was fake. It’s no wonder you and my cousin are BFF’s

now. Although at least Chad owns her sluttiness. She doesn't put on an act.'

My whole body goes rigid. 'What are you talking about?'

She laughs, and it's chilling how happy she sounds. That's when I know I'm already dead. I brace myself for whatever mean thing will come out of her mouth, but even still I'm not ready for what comes next.

Part: 4

Video- of my shows- and there over 50 of them all online forever, and

10 pages of me need dripping to come from my puss, with those kinds of pics!

Karly- ‘I’m talking about how you and Marcel had full-on sex in the hot tub last night.’ My mind goes completely blank. I might even blackout for a second. I can feel myself sway on my feet. Somebody comes quickly with the smelling salts; I’m about to faint. My head is swimming. ‘Who told you that?’ I choke out. ‘Who said that?’ Maddie tilts her head to the side.

‘Everybody?’

‘But then again… we didn’t.’

‘I’m sorry, but I think it’s disgusting. I mean, sex in a hot tub- a public hot tub- is just ... ‘She shudders.’ ‘God only knows what kind of stuff is floating around in there now.

Families use that hot tub, Lara Jean. There could be a family in there right now.’

Tears are spiking my eyes. ‘All we did was a kiss. I don’t know why people would even say that.’

‘Um, because Marcel telling them you did?’

My whole body goes cold. It’s not true. There’s no way that’s true.

‘All the guys think he’s a God because he got sweet little Lara Jean Covey to give it up in the hot tub. Just so you know, the only reason Marcel even dated you was to make me jealous.

His ego couldn’t take the fact that I dumped him for an older guy. He was using you. If he got free sex out of

it, all the better. But he still came running whenever I called.

That's because he loves me. He will never love another girl as much as he loves me.' Whatever she sees in my face must please her, because she smiles. 'Now that Blake and I are done-well, I guess we'll see, won't we?' I stand there mute and numb as she fluffs her hair in the mirror.

'But don't worry. Now that you're a slut, I'm sure you'll have plenty of guys who'll want to date you. For a night.'

I flee. I run out of the ladies' room and out the doors, back onto the bus, and I cry.

PEOPLE ARE STARTING TO FILE back on the bus. I can feel their eyes on me, so I keep my head turned toward the window. I run my finger along the edge of the foggy glass. The window is cold, so it leaves a trail.

Chad slides in next to me. In a low voice, she says, 'Um, I just heard something cray-cray.' Uninteresting, I say, 'What did you hear? That Marcel and I had sex in the hot tub last night?'

‘Oh my God! Yeah! Are you okay?’

My chest feels tight. If I get a good breath, I am going to start crying again, I know it.

I close my eyes. ‘We didn’t have sex. Who told you that?’

‘Marcel.’ -making his way down the aisle. He stops at our seat. ‘Hey, why didn’t you come back to the table? Is everything okay?’ Marcel is looming over the seat, looking at me with concerned eyes.

In a quiet voice, I say, ‘Everybody’s saying how we had sex in the tub.’

He groans. ‘People need to mind their own business.’ He doesn’t sound surprised, not at all.

‘So, you already knew?’

‘Some of the guys were asking me about it this morning.’

‘But- where did they even get that idea?’ I feel like I’m going to be sick.

He shrugs. ‘I don’t know, maybe somebody saw us. What does it even matter? It’s not true.’

I fasten my lips together tight. I can’t cry right now, because if I start, I’ll never be able to stop. I will cry the whole way home, and everyone will see, and I can’t have that. I fix my observation somewhere over his slick shoulder.

‘I don’t get it. Why are you mad at me?’ He’s still confused.

People are starting to bottleneck behind Marcel. They need to get to their seats. ‘People are waiting for you,’ I say.

He says, ‘Chad, can I have my chair here?’ Chris looks at me and I shake my head.

Part: 5

A little hair on my puss- yet it’s down on my dildo, that sucked to a book, so I can thrill ride it hard, till I scream come, for all you boys, and you knotty girls too.

≈ Past remembers of

Karly’s sis… ≈

‘It’s my seat now, D*ckweed,’ she says.

‘Come on, Liv Jean,’ he is saying, touching my shoulder.

I jerk away from him and his mouth drops open. People are looking at us and whispering and snickering.

He glances over his shoulder, his face red. Then he finally makes his way down the aisle.

‘Are you okay?’ Chad asks.

I can feel my eyes welling up. ‘No. Not really.’

She sighs. ‘It’s not fair for the girl. Guys have it easy. I’m sure they were all acknowledging him, pounding him on the back for being such a stud.’ Snuffling, I say, ‘Do you think he’s the one who told folks?’

‘Who knows?’

A tear trickles down to my cheek and Chad wipes it away with her sweater sleeve. ‘It might not have been

him. But it doesn't matter, Liv- Jean, because even if he didn't encourage all the talk, I doubt he discouraged it, if you know what I'm saying.'

I shake my head.

'What I'm saying is, I'm sure he denied it- with a shit-eating grin on his face. That's how guys like Marcel are. They love to look like the man, have all the other guys look up to them.' Brattie says, 'They care more about their reputation than yours.' She shakes her head. 'But what's done is done. You've just got to hold your head up and act

like you don’t give a shit.’ I nod, but more tears leak out.

‘I’m telling you; he isn’t worth it. Let Gen have him.’ Chris tousles my hair.

‘What else can you do, kid?’

Olivia comes on board last. I quickly straighten up and wipe my eyes and brace myself. But she doesn’t go directly to her seat. She stops at Beth Morgan’s seat and whispers something in her ear. Beth gasps and turns in her seat- and looks right at me.

OMG- Oh my God- my God…

Chad and I watch as Genevieve goes from seat to seat.

‘B*tch,’ Chad respires.

Tears burn my eyes. ‘I’m just going to go to sleep now,’ and I rest my head on Chad’s shoulder, and I cry. She keeps her arm tight around me.

Part: 6

Photo of my boobs ≈ Past remembers of Karly sis… ≈ MAGGIE AND KILLIE PICK ME up from school. They ask me how the trip was if I stayed

on the slope all day. I try to be upbeat; I even make up a story about how I went down a blue circle slope. Softly SHE asks, ‘Is everything okay?’

I pause- to the moments within. Maggie always knows when I’m not significant in saying all the truth. ‘Yeah. I’m just tired. Chad and I stayed up late talking.’

‘Take a nap when we get home,’ Maggie recommends.

My phone buzzes and I look down at it. A text from Marcel.

Can we talk?

I turn off my phone. ‘I think maybe I’ll just sleep right through Christmas break,’ I say. Thank God and Jesus for Christmas break. At least I have ten days before I have to go back to school and face everyone. Maybe I’ll just never go back. Maybe I can convince Daddy to homeschool me.

When Daddy and Killie go to bed, Margot and I wrap presents in the living room. Middle- wrap, Maggie decides that we should have a recital party the day after Christmas. I’d

hoped she'd forgotten all about her grand idea to have a recital party, but Margot's memory has always been killer. 'It will be a post- Christmas, Pre-New Year's Eve party,' she says, tying a bow on one of Kitty's presents from Daddy.

~*~

'It's too last-minute,' I say, carefully cutting a sheet of rocking horse wrapping paper. I'm being extra careful because I want to save a strip of it for a background page in Maggie's

scrapbook, which is nearly done. ‘No one will come.’

‘Yes, they will! We haven’t had one in ages; tons of people used to come.’ She gets up and starts pulling down Mommy’s old cookbooks and stacking them on the coffee table.

‘Don’t be a Grinch. I think this should be a tradition that we bring back for Kellie's sake.’ I cut off a strip of fat green ribbon. Maybe this party will help me take my mind off things. ‘Find that Mediterranean chicken dish

Mommy used to make. With the honey yogurt dip.'

'Yes! And remember the caviar dip? People love the caviar dip. We have to make that, too. Should we do cheese straws or cheese puffs?'

'Cheese puffs,' I say. Margot's so excited about it that even in my current state of self-pity, I can't begrudge her. She gets a pen and paper from the kitchen and starts writing things down. 'So, we said the chicken dish, caviar dip, cheese puffs, punch ... We can bake some cookies or

brownies. We'll invite all the neighbors- Josh and his parents, the Shahs, Ms. Child.

Who of your friends do you want to invite? Chad?'

I shake my head. 'Chad is visiting Becca Mitchel, her relatives in the upper parts of the state. around this time…

Too quickly I say, 'No. Nothing happened.'

'I think he might be going out of town too.' I can tell Maggie he

doesn’t believe me, but she doesn’t press me further.

(Flashback)

Kellie- She sends the invites out that night, and right away there are five yeses. In the comments section Aunt-e -M. (not our real aunt, but one of Mommy’s best friends) writes, Maggie, I can’t wait to hear you and dad sing ‘Baby, It’s Cold Outside!’ Another recital party tradition. Maggie and Daddy intone ‘Baby, It's Cold Outside’ and I am always commissioned to sing ‘Santa Baby.’ I used to do it

lying on top of the piano with my mom's high heels on and our grandma's fox stole. Not this year. No way.

When Maggie tries to get me to go with her and Killie to deliver our cookie baskets to the nationals the next day, I beg off and say I'm tired. I go up to my room to put the finishing touches on Maggie's scrapbook and listen to only the slow songs from Dirty Dancing, and I keep checking my phone to see if Ray texted again.

He hasn't, but Ray has. I heard what happened. Are you okay? So even

Josh knows? He's not even in our grade. Does the whole school know? I write back, it isn't true, and he writes back, you don't have to tell me- I didn't believe it for a second, which makes me feel weepy. He and Maggie have hung out once since she's been home, but they haven't taken that DC trip Josh mentioned. It's probably for the best if I go ahead and take the Josh and-Maggie page out of the scrapbook.

I stay up late just in case Ray texts again. I think to myself, if he calls or texts me tonight, I'll know he's

thinking about me too and maybe I'll forgive him.

But he doesn't text or call, around three a.m. I throw away Marcel's notes. I delete the picture of him from my phone; I delete his number. I think that if I just delete him enough, it will be like none of it ever happened and my heart won't hurt so badly.

Part: 7

Kelly- Photo of me using my butt plug, and masturbating over 6 times!

≈ Past memories of Karly's little sister… ≈ Video online forever- CHRISTMAS MORNING, KITTY WAKES Us, Everyone, while it is still- um- dark out, which is her tradition, and Daddy makes waffles, which is his tradition.

We only ever eat waffles on Christmas, for the reason that we all agree it’s too much trouble to lug the waffle iron out and clean it and store it back on the cabinet top shelf where we

keep it. And anyway, it makes waffles more of a special occasion this way.

We take turns opening presents to make it last longer. I give Maggie her scarf, and the scrapbook, which she loves. She pores over every page, screaming over my handiwork, marveling over my font choices and paper scraps. Hugging it to her chest, she says, ‘This is the perfect gift,’ and I feel like all the tension and bad feelings between us evaporate into nothingness. Maggie's gift to me is a pale pink cashmere sweater from Scotland.

I tried it on over my nightgown and it’s so soft and luxurious. Kylie's present from Maggie is an art set with oil pastels and watercolors and special markers, which makes Killie squeal like a piglet. In return, Kitty gives her socks with monkeys on them. I give Killie a new basket for her bike and the ant farm she asked for months ago, and Killie gives me a book on knitting. ‘So, you can get better,’ she says.

The three of us pitched in for Daddy’s present, a thick Scandinavian pullover that makes him look like an ice

fisherman. It's a little too big, but Daddy insists he likes it that way. He gives Maggie a fancy new e-reader, Kitty a bike helmet with her name on it, Kellie, and me a gift certificate to Oliva Grandin. 'I wanted to get you that locket necklace you're always looking at, but it was gone,' he says. 'But I bet you will find something else you like just as much.' I jump up and throw my arms around him. I feel like I could cry.

Santa, aka Daddy, brings silly gifts like sacks of coal and water guns with disappearing ink inside, and also

practical things like athletic socks and printer ink and my favorite kind of pens- I guess Santa shops at Costco too. Santa- got Killie a new dildo too, thanks to me!

When we're done the opening presents, I can tell Cat is disappointed there is no puppy, but she doesn't say anything. I pull her into my arms and whisper to her, 'There's always your birthday next month,' and she nods.

Daddy goes to see if the waffle iron is hot and the doorbell rings.

‘Kellie, could you get that?’ He calls from the pantry.

Kellie goes to the door, and seconds later we hear her high-pitched scream. Maggie and I leap up and run to the door, and right there on the welcome mat is a basket with a biscuit colored puppy in it and a ribbon around its neck. We all start jumping up and down and high-pitched yell.

Kellie scoops the puppy up in her arms and runs into the living room with it, where Daddy stands grinning. ‘Daddy- Daddy- Daddy- Daddy!’ she

cries. ‘Thank you thank you thank you!’ I got a goofy small for what I got here and ran me over a hug.

According to Daddy, he picked the puppy up from the animal shelter two nights ago, and our neighbor Ms. Rothschild has been hiding him in her house. It’s a boy, by the way, we figure that out pretty quick since he pees all over the kitchen floor.

Part: 8

Karly- Photo of me showing my ass and spreading puss-puss!

≈ Past memories of Karly's little sister… ≈

‘I always wanted a dog with bangs,’ I say, cuddling him to my cheek.

‘What should we name him?’

Maggie asks. We all look to Killie, who chews on her bottom lip in a contemplative way.

‘I don’t know,’ she says.

‘How about Sandy?’ I suggest.

Killie sneers. ‘Unoriginal.’

‘No thanks,’ Kitty says. Cocking her head, she says, ‘What about Jenny?’

‘Jenny,’ Daddy repeats. ‘I like it, yet she is not here so do not say…’ Maggie nods. ‘It has a nice ring to it… yeah moving on.’

‘What’s her full name?’ I ask, setting him down on the floor.

She claps her hands and says it, wagging like mad.

I only check my phone once to see if Marcel called. And he didn’t.

THE MORNING OF THE PART- I've come downstairs after ten, and they've been working for hours.

~*~

Kelly- young Holladay's:

'Hello, the toilet needed to be scrubbed anyway!

Besides, it'll all be worth it. We haven't done a recital party in so long.'

She slides a cookie sheet into the oven. 'Daddy, I'm going to need you to make a run to the store soon. We're

out of sour cream and we need a big bag of ice.'

'Aye, aye, Captain,' our dad says.

The only one of us Margot doesn't put to work is Jamie Fox-Pickle, who is taking a nap under the Christmas tree.

I'm wearing a red-and-green plaid bow tie with a white button-down and a tartan skirt. I read on a fashion blog that mixing plaids is a thing. I go to Kitty's room to beg her to give me a

braid crown, and she curls her lip at me and says, ‘That’s not very sexy.’

I frown… ‘Excuse me? I wasn’t trying to look sexy! I was trying to look festive.’

Hmm… We might need to put some parental controls on the TV.

Killie goes to my closet and pulls out my red off-the-shoulder knit dress with the swishy skirt. ‘Wear this. It’s still Christmassy but less self-costume.’

‘Fine, but I’m putting my candy cane pin on it.’

‘Fine, you can wear the pin. But leave your hair down. No braid.’ I give her my best sad pouty face, but Killie shakes her head. ‘I’ll curl the ends to give it somebody, but no braids of any kind.’ I plug in the curling iron and sit on the floor with Jamie in my lap, and Kitty sits on the bed and sections my hair off. She wraps my hair around the barrel like a real pro.

The party?’ She asks me.

‘I’m not sure,’ I say.

‘What about Marcel?’

‘He’s not coming,’ I say.

‘Why not?’

‘He just can’t,’ I tell her.

Maggie’s at the piano playing ‘Blue Christmas,’ and our old piano sitting next to her singing along. Across the room, Daddy’s showing off a new cactus about her divorce when Marcel walks in wearing a green sweater with a button-down shirt underneath,

carrying a Christmas tin. I almost choke on my punch.

Kitty spots him when I do. ‘You came!’ she cries. She runs right into his arms, and he puts down the cookie tin and picks her up and throws her around. When he sets her down, she takes him by the hand and over to the buffet table, where I’m busying myself rearranging the cookie plate.

‘Look what Marcel brought,’ she says, pushing him forward. He hands me the cookie tin. ‘Here. Fruitcake cookies my mom made.’

‘What are you doing here?’ I whisper accusingly. ‘The kid invited me.’ He jerks his head toward Kellie, who has conveniently run back over to the puppy. Marcel is standing up now, looking over at us with a frown on his face.

‘We need to talk.’

So now he wants to talk. Well, too late. ‘We don’t have anything to talk about.’

Marcel takes me by the elbow and I try to shake him off, but he won’t

let go. He steers me into the kitchen. ‘I want you to make up an excuse to Kellie and leave,’ I say… ‘And you can take your fruitcake cookies with you.’

‘First, tell me why you’re so pissed at me.’

‘Because!’ I burst out. ‘Everyone is saying how we had sex in the hot tub and I’m a slut and you don’t even care!’

‘I told the guys we didn’t!’

‘Did you? Did you tell them that all we did was kiss and that’s all we’ve

ever done?' Marcel hesitates, and I go on. 'Or did you say, 'Guys, we didn't have sex in the hot tub,' wink- wink, nudge- nudge.'

Marcel glares at me. 'Give me a little more credit than that, Covey.'

'You're such a scumbag, Marcel.'

I spin around. There is Marcel, in the doorway, glaring at Marcel.

'It's your fault people are saying that crap about Lara Jean.'

Marcel shakes his head in disgust. ‘She’d never do that.’

‘Keep your voice down,’ I whisper, my eyes darting around. This is not happening right now. At a recital party, with everyone, I have known my entire life in the next room.

Marcel’s jaw twitches. ‘This is a private conversation, Marcel, between me and my girlfriend. Why don’t you go play World of Warcraft or something? Or maybe there’s a

Godfather marathon on TV.’

‘Freak you,’ Marcel says. I gasp. To me, Marcel says, ‘Liv, Jean, this is exactly what I’ve been trying to protect you from. He’s not good enough for you. He’s only bringing you down.’ Beside me, Marcel stiffens. ‘Get over it! She doesn’t like you anymore. It’s over. Move on.’

‘You have no idea what you’re talking about,’ Marcel says. ‘Whatever, dude. She told me you tried to kiss her. You try that again, and I’m kicking your ass.’

Marcel lets out a short laugh.

‘Go ahead.’

Panic rises in my chest as Marcel moves toward Marcel with purpose. I pull Marcel’s arm back. ‘Stop it!’ That’s when I see her. Margot, standing a few feet behind Marcel, her hand to her mouth. The piano music has stopped, the world has stopped spinning because Maggie has heard the whole thing.

‘It’s not true, is it? Please tell me it’s not true.’

I open and close my mouth. I don’t have to say anything because she already knows.

Maggie who knows me so well. ‘How could you?’ she asks, and her voice trembles. The hurt in her eyes makes me want to die. I’ve never seen that look in her eyes before.

‘Margot,’ Marcel begins, and she shakes her head and backs away. ‘Get out,’ she says, her voice breaking. Then she looks at me. ‘You’re my sister.

You’re the person- I trust more than anybody.’

‘Go-go, wait-’ But she’s already gone. I hear her feet run up the stairs. I hear her door shut and not slam.

And then I burst into tears.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Marcel says to me. Forlornly, he says, ‘This is all my fault.’ He walks out of the back door.

Marcel moves to put his arms around me, but I stop him. ‘Can you just… can you just go?’

Hurt and surprise register on his face. ‘Sure, I can go,’ he says, and he walks out of the kitchen. I go to the bathroom, off the side of the kitchen, and sit on the toilet and cry. Someone knocks, and I stop crying and call out, ‘Just a minute or so.’

Then I get up and splash cold water on my face. My eyes are still red and puffy. I run water with a hand towel and I wet my face with it.

My mom used to do this for me when I was sick… She had put an ice-cold washcloth over my forehead, and

she’d switch it out with a fresh one when it was not cold anymore. I wish my mom was here.

Part: 9

When I step back into the party, Maggie is sitting at the piano playing- ‘Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,’ and I have my dad cornered on the couch. She’s throwing back champagne, and he has a mildly startled look on his face. As soon as he sees me, my dad jumps off the couch and over to me. ‘Oh, thank God,’ he

says. ‘Where’s Go-go? We haven’t done our number yet.’

‘She doesn’t feel well,’ I say.

‘Hm. I’ll go check on her.’

‘I think she just wants to be left alone.’

Daddy’s forehead creases.

‘Did she and Marcel fight? I just saw him leave.’

I swallow. ‘Maybe. I’ll go talk to her.’

He pats me on the shoulder.

‘You’re a good sister, honey.’

I force a smile. ‘Thank you, Daddy.’

I go upstairs, and Margot’s bedroom door is locked. I stand outside it and ask, ‘Can I come inside?’ No answer.

‘Please, Margot. Please just let me enlighten me…’ Still nothing.

‘I’m sorry. Maggie, I’m so sorry.

Please talk to me.’

I sit down outside my door and start to cry. My big sister knows how to hurt me best. Silence from her, being shut out by her, is the worst punishment she could conjure up. BEFORE MOMMY DIED, Maggie AND I were friends. We battled constantly, mostly for the reason that I was always messing up something of hers- some game, some toy. Maggie had a doll she loved named Rochelle. Rochelle had silky auburn hair, and she wore glasses as Margot did.

Mommy and Daddy had given her to her for her sixth birthday. Maggie only doll. She adored her. I remember begging her to let me hold her, just for a second, but Margot always said no.

There was this one time, I had a cold, and I stayed home from school.

I crept into Margot’s room and I took… She and I played with her all afternoon. I pretended she and I were best friends. I got it into my head that Rochelle's face was kind of plain; she would look better with lipstick on. It

would be a favor too- her- if I made them more beautiful.

I got one of Mommy's lipsticks out of her bathroom drawer and I put some on her lips. Right away I knew it was a mistake. I'd drawn it on outside of her lip lines, she looked clownish, not sophisticated. So, then I tried to clean off the lipstick with toothpaste, but it only made her look like she had a mouth disease.

I hid under my blankets until Margot came home. When she found

the state Rochelle was in, I heard her screech.

After Mommy died, we all had to realign ourselves. Everybody had new roles. She and I were no longer locked in battle because we both understood that Kellie was ours to take care of now. ‘Look out for your sister,’ Mommy was always saying. When she was alive, we did it begrudgingly. After she was gone, we did it because we wanted to. Days go by and still nothing. She looks through me, speaks to me only when necessary.

Part: 10

Kelly- Photo of me with my pink vibrates.

≈ Past remembrance of Karly little sister ≈

Kellie watches us with worried eyes. Daddy is bewildered and asks what's going on with us, but doesn't push me for an answer. There is a wall between us now, and I can feel her moving farther and farther away from me. Sisters are supposed to fight and make up because they are sisters and

sisters always find their way back to each other. But the thing that scares me is that maybe we won't.

OUTSIDE MY WINDOW, SNOW IS falling in clumps that look like cotton.

The yard is starting to look like a cotton field. I hope it snows all day and all night. I hope it's a blizzard.

There's a knock at my door.

I lift my head from my pillow. 'Come in.'

My dad comes in and sits down at my desk. ‘So,’ he says, scratching his chin the way he does when he’s uncomfortable. ‘We need to talk.’

My stomach drops. I sit up and wrap my arms around my knees. ‘Did Margot tell you?’

My dad clears his throat. ‘She did.’ I can’t even look at him. ‘This is awkward. I never had to do this with Margot, so…’ He clears his throat again.

‘You’d think I would be better at this since I’m a health professional. I’ll just say that I think you’re too young to be having sex, Liv, Jean- girls. I don’t think you’re ready yet.’ He sounds like he’s about to cry.

‘Did- did Marcel pressure you in any way?’

I can feel all the blood rush to my face. ‘Daddy, we didn’t have sex.’

He nods, but I don’t think he believes me. ‘I’m your dad, so of course, I’d rather you wait until you’re

fifty, but... ‘He clears his throat again. ‘I want you to be safe. I’m making an appointment with Dr. Vudeciez on Monday.’

I start to cry. ‘I don’t need an appointment because I’m not doing anything! I didn’t have sex! Not in the hot tub or anyplace. Somebody made the whole thing up. You have to believe me.’

My dad has a pained expression on his face. ‘Liv, Jean- girls, I know it’s not easy to talk about this with a dad and not a mom. I wish your

mom was here to navigate us through this.'

'I wish she was too because she'd believe me.' Tears are running down my cheeks. It's bad enough for strangers to think the worst of me, but I never thought my sister and dad would believe it.

'I'm sorry.' My dad puts his arms around me. 'I'm sorry. I do believe you. If you tell me you're not having sex, you're not having sex. I just don't want you to grow up too fast. When I look at you, you're still as young

as Kellie to me. You're my little girl, Liv, Jean- girls.'

I sag against him. There's no place safer than my dad's arms. 'Everything's a mess. You don't trust me anymore; Marcel and I are broken up; Margot hates me.' 'I trust you. Of course, I trust you.

And of course, you and Margot will make up like you always do. She was only worried about you; that's why she came to me.' No, it's not. She did it out of spite. It's her fault that Daddy thought that of me for even a second.

Daddy lifts my chin and wipes the tears off my face. ‘You must like Marcel, huh?’

‘No,’ I sob. ‘Maybe. I don’t know.’

He tucks my hair behind my ears. ‘Everything will work out.’ There is a specific kind of fight you can only have with your sister. It’s the kind where you say things you can’t take back. You say them for the reason that you can’t help but say them because you’re so angry it’s coming up your

throat and out your eyes; you’re so angry you can’t see straight.

Part: 11

All you see is blood. As soon as Daddy leaves and I hear him go to his room to get ready for bed, I barge into Maggie's room without knocking.

Margot is at her desk on her laptop.

She looks up at me in surprise. Wiping my eyes, I say, ‘You can be mad at me all you want, but you had no right to go to Daddy behind my back.’

Her voice is piano-string tight as she says, ‘I didn’t do that as revenge. I did it because you have no idea what you’re doing, and if you’re not careful, you’re going to end up some sad teenage statistic.’ Coldly, as if she is speaking to a stranger, Maggie continues. ‘You’ve changed, Liv, Jenn-girls. I honestly don’t even know who you are anymore.’

~*~

‘Nope, you don’t know me anymore, if you think for one second that I would have sex on a school trip!

In a hot tub, in plain view of anybody who might happen to walk by? You must not know me at all!' And then I lay it down, the card I've been holding against her. 'Just because you had sex with Marcel, that doesn't mean I'm going to have sex with Marcel.'

Margot sucks in her breath.

'Lower your voice.'

I feel happy that I've wounded her too. I yell, 'Now that Daddy's already disappointed in me, he can't be disappointed in you, too, right?'

I whirl around to go back to my room, and Margot follows close behind me.

‘Come back here!’ She shouts.

‘No!’ I try to close my door in her face, but she wedges her foot inside.

‘Get out!’

I lean my back against the door, but Margot is stronger than me. She pushes her way in and locks the door behind her.

She advanced toward me and I backed away from her. There's a dangerous light in her eyes. She's the righteous one now. I can feel myself start to shrink, to cower. 'How did you know Marcel and I had sex, Lara Jean?

Did he tell you that himself while you two were going behind my back?' 'We never went behind your back! It wasn't like that.'

'Then what was it like?' She demands.

A sob escapes my throat. ‘I liked him first. I liked him all that summer before ninth grade. I thought - thought he liked me back. But then one day you said you were dating, and so I just, I swallowed it. I wrote him a goodbye letter.’ Maggie's face twists into a sneer. ‘Do you seriously expect me to feel sorry for you know?’

‘Nope. I’m just trying to explain what happened. I stopped liking him, I swear I did. I didn’t think of him like that again, but then, after you left, I realized that deep down I still had

feelings for him. And then my letter got sent and Marcel found out, so I started to pretend to date, Marcel…'

She shakes her head. 'Just stop. I don't want to hear it. I don't even know what you are talking about right now.'

'Marcel and I only kissed one time. Once. And it was a huge mistake, and I did not even want to do it in the first place! You're the one he loves, not me.'

She says, ‘How can I believe anything you ever say to me now?’

‘Because it’s the truth.’

Trembling, I tell her, ‘You have no idea the power you have over me. How much does your opinion mean to me? How much I look up to you.’

Part: 12

Kelly- 2 fingers in the hole, she is snap-chatting.

≈ Past memories of Karly's little sister... ≈

Margot’s face screws up like a fist; she is holding back tears. ‘You know what Mommy would always say to me?’ She lifts her chin higher. ‘‘Take care of your sisters.’ So that’s what I did. I’ve always tried to put you and Kellie first. Do you have any idea how hard it was being so far away from you guys? How lonely it was? All I wanted to do was come back home, but I couldn’t because I have to be strong. I have to be’ she struggles for breath, a good example. I can’t be weak. I have to show you guys how to be brave.

~*~

Because – ‘because Mommy isn’t

here to do it.’

Tears roll down my cheeks. ‘I know. You don’t have to tell me, Gogo.

I know how much you do for us.’

‘But then I left, and it’s like you didn’t need me as much as I thought.’ Her voice breaks. ‘You were fine without me.’

‘Only because you taught me everything!’ I cry out.

Margot’s face crushes like.

‘I’m sorry,’ I weep. ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘I needed you, Liv, Jenn- and girls.’

She takes one step toward me and

I take one toward her, and we fall into each other’s arms, crying, and the relief I feel is immeasurable. We

are sisters, and there's nothing she or I can ever say or do to change that.

Daddy knocks on the door. 'Girls?

Everything okay there?'

We look at each other and together at the same time, we say, 'We're fine, Daddy.'

IT'S NEW YEAR'S EVE. New Year's Eve has always been a stay-at-home holiday for us. We make popcorn and drink sparkling cider, and at

midnight we go outside to the backyard and light up sparklers.

Some of my friends from high school are having a party at a cabin in the woods, and she said she wasn't going to go, that she'd rather stay with us, but Kellie and I made her. I hope that- Marcel is going too, and that they'll talk, and who knows what will happen. It's New Year's Eve, after all.

The night of new beginnings.

We sent Daddy to a party someone from the hospital is throwing.

Kellie ironed his favorite button-down shirt and I picked the tie and we shoved him out the door. I think Grandma is right; it's not good to be alone.

'Why are you still sad?' Kellie asks me as I dump the popcorn into a bowl for us. We're in the kitchen; she's sitting on a stool at the breakfast bar with her legs dangling. The puppy is curled up like a centipede under her stool, gazing up at Kellie with hopeful eyes. 'You and Maggie made up. What's to be sad about?'

I'm about to deny being sad, but then I just sigh and say, 'I don't know.' Kellie grabs a handful of popcorn and drops a few kernels on the floor, which Jamie gobbles up. 'How can you not know?'

'Because sometimes you just feel sad and you can't explain it.'

Kellie cocks her head to the side.

'PMS?'

I count the days since my last period. 'No. It's not PMS. Just because

a girl is sad, it doesn’t mean it has anything to do with PMS.’

‘Then why?’ She presses.

‘I don’t know! Maybe I miss someone.’

‘You miss Marcel?’

I hesitate. ‘Marcel.’ Despite everything, Marcel.

‘So-o call him.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Why not?’

I don’t know how to answer her.

It’s all so embarrassing, and I want to be someone she can look up to. But she’s waiting, her little brow furrowed, and I know I have to tell her the truth.

‘Kellie, it was all fake. The whole thing. We were never really together. He never really liked me.’

Kellie wrinkles. ‘What do you mean it was fake?’

Sighing, I say, ‘It all started with those letters. Remember how my hatbox went missing?’ Kellie nods. ‘I had letters inside, letters I wrote to the boys I loved. They were supposed to be private; they were never supposed to be sent, but then somebody did, and everything turned into a mess.

Marcel got one, and Marcel got one, and I was just so humiliated. Marcel and I decided to pretend to date so I could save face in front of Marcel and he could make his ex-girlfriend jealous, and the whole thing just spun

out of control.’ Kellie is biting her lip nervously. ‘Lara Jean - if I tell you something, you have to promise not to be mad.’

‘What? Just tell me.’

‘First promise.’

‘Okay, I promise I won’t be mad.’ Prickles are going up my spine.

In a rush, Kellie says, ‘I’m the one who sent the letters.’

‘What?’ I scream.

‘You promised you wouldn’t be mad!’

‘What?’ I scream again, but less loud. ‘Kellie, how could you do that to me?’

She hangs her head. ‘Because I was mad at you. You were teasing me about liking Marcel; you said I was going to name my dog after him. I was so mad at you.

So, when you were sleeping- I snuck into your room and stole your hatbox, and I read all your letters, and

then I sent them. I regretted it right away, but it was too late.'

'How did you even know about my letters?' I yell…

She squints at me. 'Because I go through your stuff sometimes when you're not at home.'

I'm about to scream at her some more, and then I remember how I read Maggie's letter from- Marcel and me, bite my/our tongue(s.) As calmly as I can, I say, 'Do you even know how

much trouble you've caused? How could you be so spiteful to me?'

'I'm sorry,' she whispers. Fat teardrops form in the corners of her eyes, and one plops down like a raindrop. I want to hug her, to comfort her, but I'm still so mad. 'It's fine,' I say in a voice that is the exact opposite of fine. None of this would have happened if she hadn't sent those letters.

Kellie jumps up and runs upstairs, and I think she's going to her room to cry in private. I know what I should do. I should go comfort her,

forgive her for real. It’s my turn to be a good instance. To be a good big sister.

I’m about to go upstairs when she comes running back into the kitchen.

With my hatbox in her arms.

WHEN IT WAS JUST Maggie- and I, my mom used to buy two of everything, blue for Maggie and pink for me. The same quilt, stuffed animal, or Easter basket in two different colors. Everything had to be fair; we had to have the same number of carrot sticks

or French fries or marbles or erasers shaped like cupcakes. Except I was always losing my erasers or eating my carrot sticks too fast, and then I'd beg for just one of Margot's.

Sometimes Mommy would make her share, which even then I realized wasn't fair, that obviously, Margot shouldn't be penalized for eating her snack slowly or keeping track of her erasers. After Kellie was born, Mommy tried to do blue, pink, and yellow, but it's just a- lot harder finding one thing in three different

colors. Also, Kellie was more years undeveloped than us and we didn’t want the same kinds of toys as her.

The teal hatbox might be the only gift from Mommy I got that was just for me. I didn’t have to share it; this one was mine and mine alone. When I opened it, I expected to find a hat, maybe a straw hat with a floppy brim, or maybe a newsboy- but it was empty.

Part: 13

‘This is for your special things,’ she said. ‘You can put all your most precious, most favorite, most secret things in here.’

‘Like what?’ I said.

‘Whatever fits inside. Whatever you want to keep just for you.’ Kellie’s pointy little chin trembles and she says, ‘I am sorry, Lara Jean.’ When I see that, my chin trembles, I can’t be mad anymore. I just can’t, not even a little bit. So, I go to her, and I hug her tight. ‘It’s all right,’ I say, and she sags against me in relief. ‘You can keep the

box. Put all your secrets in it.’ Kellie shakes her head. ‘No, it’s yours. I don’t want it.’ She thrusts it at me. ‘I put something in there for you.’ I open the box, and there are notes.

Notes and notes and notes.

Marcel’s notes. Marcel’s notes I threw away.

‘I found them when I was emptying your trash,’ she says. Hastily she adds, ‘I only read a couple. And then I saved them because I could tell they were important.’

I touch one that Marcel folded into an airplane. ‘Kellie - you know Marcel and I, are not getting back together, right?’

~*~

#- Hashtag: (Got mall?)

Kellie grabs the bowl of popcorn and says, ‘Just read them.’ Then she goes into the living room and turns on the TV. I close the box and take it with me upstairs. When I am in my room, I sit on the floor and spread them out around me.

A lot of the notes just say things like ‘Meet you at your locker after school’ and ‘Can I borrow your chemistry notes from yesterday?’ I found the spider webs’ one from Halloween, plus it makes me smile. Another one says, ‘Can you take the bus home today?

I want to surprise Kellie and pick her up from school, so she can show me and my car off to her friends.’

‘Thanks for coming to the estate sale with me this weekend. You made the day fun. I owe you one.’

‘Don’t forget to pack a Korean yogurt for me!’ ‘If you make Marcel’s dumb white- chocolate cranberry cookies and not my fruitcake ones, it’s over.’ I laugh out loud. And then, the one I read over and over: ‘You look pretty today. I like you in blue.’

I have never gotten a love letter before. But reading these notes like this, one after the other, it feels like I have. It’s like- it’s like there’s only ever been, Marcel… Like everyone else that came before him, they were all to prepare me for this. I think I see the

difference now, between loving someone from afar and loving someone up close. When you see them up close, you see the real them, but they also get to see the real you.

-And-

Marcel does… he sees me, and I see him. Love is scary: it changes; it can go away. That's part of the risk. I don't want to be scared anymore. I want to be brave, like Margot. It's almost a new year, after all. Close to midnight, I gather up Kellie and the puppy and the sparklers. We put on

heavy coats and I make Kellie wear a hat. ‘Should we put a hat on Jennie too?’ she asks me.

‘He doesn’t need one,’ I tell her.

‘He’s already got on a fur coat.’

The stars are out by the dozen; they look like faraway gems. We’re so lucky to live in the mountains the way we do. You just feel closer to the stars.

To heaven. I light up sparklers for each of us, and Kellie starts dancing around the snowmaking a ring of fire

with hers. She’s trying to coax Jamie to jump through, but he isn’t having it. All he wants to do is pee around the yard. Luckily, we have a fence, or I bet he’d pee his way down this whole block.

Marcel’s bedroom light is on. I see him in the window just as he opens it and calls out, ‘Song girls!’

Kellie hollers, ‘Want to light a sparkler?’

‘Maybe next year,’ Marcel calls back. I look up at him and wave my sparkler, and he smiles, and there's just

this feeling of all rightness between us. One way or another, Marcel will be in our lives. And I'm certain, I'm so suddenly certain that everything is exactly the way it's supposed to be, that I don't have to be so afraid of goodbye because goodbye doesn't have to be forever.

When I'm back in my room in my flattery nightgown, I get out my special flowy pen, and my good thick stationery and I start to write. Not a goodbye letter. Just a plain old love letter.

Dear- Marcel -

Acknowledgments-

To All My Literary Loves:

To you, fairest of them all. I think you and I might just be meant to be.

To you, for putting a ring on it.

All of my love, baby girl! <3

Look, in my opinion, the best thing you can do is find a person who loves you for exactly what you are.

Good mood, bad mood, ugly, pretty, handsome, what have you, the right person is still going to think the sun shines out your ass. That's the kind of person that's worth sticking with.

Part: 14

Come show showing the chat lines, she is masturbating, with over 2,000 boys loving her for making them explode, on the screen for her to see, yet only if you’re her top pick. ≈ Past memories of Karly's little sister… ≈ she has become a mini-me…

More and more it has been occurring to me that this, too, will change our procedures. She'll retreat to the North End and make friends with her neighbors, with people richer, and more sophisticated than I am. I'll stay in some crappy apartment on Ebensburg, and I won't miss her, or remember what it felt like to run side by side.

They've warned me that after my procedure I may not even like running anymore, period. Another side effect of the cure: People often change

their habits afterward, lose interest in their former hobbies and things that had given them pleasure.

‘The cured, incapable of strong desire, are thus rid of both remembered and future pain’ (‘After the Procedure,’ The Safety, Health, and cheerfulness.)

~*~

The world is spinning by, people and streets along, unfurling ribbon of color and sound. We ran past St. Vincent’s, the biggest all-boys

school in town. A half-dozen boys are outside playing basketball, lazily dribbling the ball around, calling to one another.

Their words are a blur, an indistinct series of shouts and barks and short bursts of laughter, the way that boys always sound whenever they're together in groups, whenever you only hear them from around corners or across streets or down the beach. It's like they have a language all their own, and for about the thousandth time, I think how glad I am that

segregation policy keeps us separate most of the time. As we run by I- think- I sense a momentary pause, a fraction of a second when all their eyes lift and turn in our direction. I'm too embarrassed to look.

My whole body goes white-hot like someone's just stuck me headfirst into an oven. But a second later I feel their eyes sweeping past me, a wind, latching on to Hana. Her blond hair flashes next to me, a coin in the sun.

The pain is creeping back into my legs, a leaden feeling, but I force

myself to keep going as we around the corner of 219- Maine- Juniper Street and Laurel St. Vincent's behind. I feel Hana straining to keep up next to me. I turn my head, barely managing to gasp out, 'Duel you.' But as Hana pulls up, arms pumping and nearly passes me, I put my head down and lunge forward, cycling my legs as fast as I can, trying to suck air into my lungs, which feel like they've shrunk to the size of a pea, fighting the screaming in my muscles.

Blackness eats the edges of my vision, and all I can see is the chain-link

fence that rises in front of us suddenly, blocking our path, and then I'm reaching out and thwacking it so hard it begins to shake, turning around to yell, 'I won!' as Hanna pulls up a second behind me, gasping for breath.

Both of us are laughing now, hiccupping and taking huge gulping breaths of air as we pace around in circles, trying to walk it off. When she can finally breathe again, Hanna straightens up, laughing. 'I let you win,' she says, an old joke of ours. I toe some gravel in her direction. She ducks

away, shrieking. ‘Keep telling yourself that.’

My hair has come out of its pigtail, and I wrestle it out of its flexible, flipping my head down so I get the wind on my neck. Sweat drips down into my eyes, stinging.

‘Nice look.’ Hana pushes me lightly, and I stumble sideways, whipping my head up to swipe back at her. She sidesteps me. There’s a gap in the chain-link fence that marks the beginning of a narrow service road.

This is blocked by a low metal gate. Hana hops it and gestures for me to follow. I haven't been paying attention to where we are: The service drives threads down through a parking lot, a forest of industrial Dumpsters and cargo storage sheds.

Yonder those are the familiar string of white square buildings, like giant teeth. This must be one of the side entrances of the lab complex. I see now that the chain-link fence is looped on top with barbed wire and marked at

twenty-foot intervals with signs that all read: PRIVATE PROPERTY. NO!

TRESPASSING, AUTHORIZED EMPLOYEES- ONLY.

Part: 15

‘I don’t think we’re supposed to-’ I start to say, but Hana cuts me off. ‘Come on,’ she calls out. ‘Live a little.’ I do a quick scan of the parking lot beyond the gate and the road behind us: no one. The small guard hut just past the gate is also empty. I lean over and peek inside.

There’s a half-eaten sandwich sitting on wax paper, and a stack of books piled messily on a small desk next to an old-fashioned radio, which is spitting static and patchy bits of music into the silence. I don’t see any Surveillance cameras, either, though there must be some. All the government buildings are wired. I hesitate for a second longer, then swing myself over the gate and catch up to Hanna. Her eyes are lit up with excitement, and I can tell that this was her plan, and her destination, all along.

~*~

‘This must be how the Invalids got in,’ she says in a breathless rush, as though we’ve been talking about- yesterday’s drama at the labs all this time.

‘Don’t- you think?’ ‘Doesn’t seem like it would have been hard.’ I’m trying to sound casual but the whole thing- the empty service road, and the enormous parking lot, like- the high overpasses, sparkling in the sun, the cobalt dumpsters and the electrical wires across the sky, the sparkling

white slope of the lab roof- smack's me uneasy. Everything is silent and very still- frozen, almost, the way things are in a dream, or just before a chief cloudburst.

I don’t want to say it to Hanna, but I’d give pretty much anything to head back to Old Port, to the complex nest of familiar streets and stores. Even though there’s no one around, I have the impression of being watched. It’s worse than the ordinary feeling of being observed in school and on the street and even at home, having to be

cautious about what you do and say, the close, blocked-in feeling that everyone gets used to eventually.

'Yeah…' Hana kicks at the packed dirt road. A plume of dust puffs up, resettles slowly. 'Pretty crappy security for a major medical facility.'

'Pretty crappy security for a petting zoo,' I say.

'I resent that.' The voice comes from behind us, and both Hana and I jump.

I spin around. The world seems to freeze for an instant.

A boy is standing behind us, arms crossed, head cocked to the side. A boy with caramel-colored skin and hair that’s a golden-brown color, like autumn leaves getting ready to fall.

Part: 16

It’s him… The boy from yesterday, from the observation deck. The Invalid… Except he isn’t an Invalid.

He’s wearing a short-sleeved navy guard’s uniform over jeans, and

he’s got a laminated government ID clipped to his collar.

‘I leave for two seconds to get a refill’-he gestures to the bottle of water he’s holdings’ and I come back to find a full-fledged break-in.’

I’m so confused I can’t move or speak or do anything. Hanna must think I’m scared because she jumps in quickly, ‘We weren’t breaking in. We weren’t doing anything. We were just running and we - hum, we got lost.’

The boy crosses his arms in front of his chest, rocking back on his heels. ‘Didn’t see any of the signs outside, huh? ‘No Trespassing’? ‘Authorized Personnel Only?’ Hana looks away.

She’s panicky too. I can feel it. Hana’s a thousand times…

More confident than I am, but neither of us is used to standing in the open and talking to a boy, especially not a- bodyguards, and it must have occurred to Hana that he already has plenty of grounds to arrest us.

‘Must have missed them,’ she… Mumbles…

‘Uh-huh.’ He raises his eyebrows. It’s obvious he doesn’t believe us, but at least he doesn’t look angry. ‘They’re pretty subtle. Solitary a few dozens- of them. I can see how you might not have noticed.’

He looks away for a second, squinting, and I get the feeling he’s trying to stop himself from laughing. He’s not like- any guard I have ever seen- at least, not the typical guards you see at the border and all-around

Pitt, fat, and slow and old. I think about how sure I was in the recent past that he came from the Wilds, the solid certainty deep inside of me. I was wrong. As he turns his head, I see the unmistakable sign of someone who is cured: the mark of the procedure, a three-pointed star, just behind the left ear, where the scientists insert a special three the pronged needle used exclusively for immobilizing the patient so that the cure can be administered. Individuals show off their scars like badges of honor; you hardly see any

curds with long hair, and the women who haven't lopped off their hair entirely are careful to wear it pulled back.

Part: 17

My fear recedes. Talking to a cured… Isn't illegal. The rules of segregation don't apply…

I'm not sure if he has recognized me or not. If so, he hasn't given any sign of it. In conclusion- I can't take it anymore, and I burst out, 'You, I saw you…' At the last second, I

can’t finish the sentence. I saw you yesterday.

You winked at me.

~*~

Hana looks startled. ‘You two know each other?’ She shoots a look at me.

Hana knows I have hardly ever exchanged two words with a boy before, unless it’s ‘Excuse me’ in the street or ‘Sorry for stepping on your toes’ when I trip on somebody.

We're not supposed to have more than minimal contact with uncured boys outside of our own families. Even after they've been cured, there's hardly a need or excuse for it, unless we are dealing with a doctor or teacher or someone like that.

He turns to look at me. His face is completely professional and composed, but then again, I swear I see something flickering in his eyes, a look of amusement or pleasure. 'Nope,' he says smoothly. 'We have never met. I'm

sure I will remember.' The flash in his eyes is back -is he laughing at me?

'I'm Hanna,' Hanna says. 'And this is Jenn.' She jabs me with an elbow. I know I must look like a fish, standing there with my mouth gaping open, but I'm too outraged to speak. He's lying. I know he's the one I saw yesterday, would bet my life on it.

Part: 18

'Marcel- nice to meet you.' Marcel keeps his eyes on me as he and his hands.

Then he extends a hand to me. ‘Jenn,’ she says thoughtfully. ‘I’ve never heard that name before.’ I hesitate. Shaking hands makes me feel awkward like I’m playing dress-up in an adult’s too-big clothing. Besides, I have never essentially touched skin-to-skin with a stranger. But he’s just standing there with his hand out, so after a second, I reach out and shake. The moment we touch, a tiny electrical shock calls through me, and I pull away quickly.

‘It’s short for Maggie,’ I say.

‘Maggie.’ Marcel tips his head back, watching me with narrowed eyes.

‘Pretty.’

I’m momentarily distracted by the way he says my name. In his mouth, it sounds musical, not clunky and angular, the way my teachers have always made it sound.

Love is in the air… like music!

Part: 19

His eyes are a warm amber color, and as I look at him, I have a sudden, flashing memory of my mother

pouring syrup over a stack of pancakes. I look away, feeling ashamed, as though he has somehow been responsible for dredging the memory up, has reached in with his hand, and wrenched it from me.

Awkwardness makes me feel irritated, and I press on, ‘I do know you. I saw you yesterday in the labs.

You were on the observation deck, watching- observing everything.’

Again, my courage fails me at the last second and I don’t say,

watching me. I can feel Hanna glaring at me, but I ignore her. She must be furious I haven't told her any of this.

Part: 20

Marcel's face doesn't change. He doesn't blink or drop his smile for even a fraction of a second. 'Cause of mistaken identity, I guess. Guards aren't allowed in the labs during evaluations. Especially not part-time guards.' For a second longer, we stand there, staring at each other. Now I know he's lying, and the easy, lazy grin

on his face makes me want to reach out and slap him.

I ball my fists and suck in a deep breath, willing myself to stay calm. I'm not the violent type. I don't know why I'm feeling so aggravated.

Hanna jumps in, breaking the tension. 'So, this is it? A part-time security guard and some 'Keep Out' signs?'

Marcel keeps his eyes on me a half-second longer. Then he turns to

look at Hanna as though noticing her for the first time. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I would have thought the labs would be better protected, that’s all. It doesn’t seem like it would be too hard to break into this place.’

Part: 21

Marcel raises his eyebrows.

‘Thinking about attempting?’ Hanna freezes, and my blood goes to ice. She has gone too far. If Alex reports us as possible supporters, or troublemakers, or anything, we’re in

for months and months of surveillance and investigation- besides, we can kiss our chances of passing the evaluations with decent scores goodbye. I picture looking for a lifetime of watching ANNA Kendrick do things to me!

Marcel must sense our fear because he raises both hands. ‘Olivia. I was kidding. You don’t exactly seem like terrorists.’ It occurs to me how ridiculous we must look in our running shorts and sweaty tank tops and neon sneakers. Or at least, I must look ridiculous. Hanna looks like a model for

athletic wear. Again, I feel a fit of blushing coming on, followed by a surge of irritation. Nope- wonder the regulators decided on the separation of boys and girls: else, it would have been a nightmare, this feeling livid, self-conscious, disordered, and annoyed all the time.

Kellie- My daddy said- that my one pap passed from a planned rockfall- what is that? That one of the girls did it the taller one.

~*~

‘This is just the stacking area, anyway, for freight and stuff.’ Marcel gestures out there the line of consignment sheds. ‘Real security starts closer to the facilities. Full-time guards, cameras, electrified fence, the whole shebang.’ Hanna doesn’t look at me, but when she speaks, I can hear the excitement creeping into her voice. ‘The loading area? Like, where are the deliveries coming?’ In my head I start praying, don’t say anything stupid. Don’t say anything dumb. Do not mention the Invalids.

‘You got it.’

Hanna dances on her feet, shifting her weight back and forth. I try to shoot her a warning look, but she avoids my eyes.

‘So, this is where the trucks come?

With medical equipment and - and other stuff?’

‘Faithfully.’ O'er I have the impression of something flickering behind Marcel’s eyes, even as the rest of his face stays neutral. I don’t trust

him, I realize, and again wonder why he is lying about being in the labs yesterday.

Maybe only because it's forbidden as he said. Maybe because he was laughing instead of trying to help out. And maybe, after all, he doesn't recognize me. We made eye contact for only a few seconds, and I'm sure to him I was only a blurry, in-between face, easy to forget. Not pretty. Not that ugly, either.

Just plain, like a thousand other faces you would see on the street.

~*~

Hands- oh hands and holding them…

He, on the other hand, is most definitely not in- between. There's something insane to me about standing in the open talking to a strange boy, even if he is cured, and though my head is whirling, it's like my vision gets razor-sharp, making everything look ultra-detailed. I notice the way a piece of his hair curls around his scar, like a surround; I notice his large brown hands and the whiteness of his teeth

and the perfect symmetry of his face. His jeans are faded and belted low on his hips, and the laces in his sneakers are the strangest ink-color blue like he has colored them in with a pen.

Thoughts oh thoughts and having them…

I think about you, this is true, what to do, it's now me and you!

I wonder how old he is. He looks my age, but he must be slightly older, maybe fourteen now. I wonder, too-a brief, flitting thought- whether

he’s already been paired. But of course, he has; he must have been.

I have been staring at him unintentionally and he turns suddenly to look at me. I drop my eyes, feeling a quick, besides, unreasonable trepidation that he has managed to read my thoughts.

‘I had love to look around,’ Karly hints not- so-o delicately. I reach out and pinch her when Marcel is not looking, in addition to her psychoanalysts away, giving me a guilty look. At least she doesn’t start grilling

him about what happened former times and get us thrown in the penitentiary or dragged through questioning, interrogating, and enquiring.

Marcel softball pitches his water magnum in the air, catches it in one small hand. ‘Trust me, there’s zilch to see- and crap. Unless you’re a fan of industrial waste. There’s enough of that from one place to another here.’ He tips his head toward the dumpsters.

‘Oh- plus the best view of the bay in Pitt. She put all the yellow and

black things over the wither- We've got that going for us too.'

'Really?' Karly wrinkles her nose momentarily distracted from her detective assignment.

Marcel nods, tosses the bottle again, catches it. As it arcs through the air the sun winks through the water like light from a charm. 'That I can show you,' he says. 'Come on now.' All I want is to get out of here, but Karly says, 'Sure, thing,' so-o I trudge along after her, mutely cursing her curiosity and obsession with all things invalid-

related, and swearing never to let her pick out running routes again.

Marcel and I walk in front, and I pick up scattered bits of their têteàtête: I hear him say he takes classes at one of the colleges but miss what he says he studies; Hanna tells him we're about to graduate. He tells her he's fourteen I think; she says that we're both turning I think in several months.

Appreciatively, they avoid talking about the botched evaluations yesterday. The service road connects

with another, lesser drive, which runs parallel to Facade Street, slanting precipitously uphill toward the northern boardwalk.

Part: 22

See us-

Here there are rows of long, metal storage sheds. The sun is flat and high and unrelenting. I’m exceedingly thirsty, but when Marcel turns around and offers me a sip from his water bottle, I say, ‘Nope,’ hurriedly and too flamboyant. The thought of putting my

mouth where his mouth has been making me feel anxious all over again.

As we come up to the top of the hill- all three of us panting a little from the climb- the bay unfolds to our right like an enormous map, a sparkling, shimmering world of blues and greens.

Hanna gasps a little.

It is a beautiful view: unobstructed, and just oh so perfect. The atmosphere is full of puffy white clouds that make me think of feather pillows, and seagulls turn lazy arcs over

the water, patterns of birds forming and dissolving in the sky.

Hanna, not Karly walks forward a few feet. ‘It’s amazing… So-freakin’ gorgeous, isn’t it? No matter how long I live here I never get used to it.’ She turns and looks at me. ‘I think this is my favorite way to see the ocean.

Middle of the afternoon, sunny and bright. It’s just like- a photograph- and that shit. Don’t you think, Liv?’ I’m feeling so relaxed- relishing the wind at the top of the hill, which sweeps over my arms, and legs, hips, boobs and

makes me feel cool and delicious, enjoying the view of the bay and the high, blinking eye of the sun- I've almost forgotten that Marcel is with us. He's been droopy back, standing a few feet behind us, and ever since we came up the hill, he ought to say a word.

Which is why I nearly jump out of my skin when he leans forward and directs a solitary word into my ear: 'Ashen.' 'Come again…?' I whirl around, my heart beating, pounding, and hitting on so very hard.

Part: 23

The lookback: the dubbed take the wanting- Hanna has turned, and twisted back to the water and is going on about wishing she had her camera and how you never seem to have anything you need.

Ray is bent close to me so close I can see his eyelashes, like perfect brushstrokes on a canvas portrait, besides now his eyes are like literally dancing with light, and with me, I feel them move in my and I feel dirty, burning as though on fire. For the lust and the lust- I must have with this boy,

not love. I want to get lost… I am in-love with…? You pick… IDK (I don't know) at this point.

'What did you say?' I repeat. My voice comes out a croaky whisper. Ray leans another inch closer, and it's like the flames seep out of his eyes, and light my whole body on fire. I have never- ever been this close- to a boy before. I feel like fainting and running all at the same time. But I can't move.

'I said, I prefer the ocean when it's grim. Or not gray. A pale, in-

between color. It runs by me again, waiting for something good to happen.'

Ray does remember- all advantageous everything never- ever forget. He was there. The ground seems to be dissolving under my feet the way it does in the dream about my mother. All I can see are his eyes, the shifting pattern of shadow and light turning there.

'You perjure yourself,' I manage to croak out.

'Why did you lie?'

Ray doesn’t answer me. He pulls away a few inches and says, ‘Of course it’s even prettier at sunset. around eight-thirty the sky looks like it’s on fire, especially at Back and Gold Cove. You should see it.’ He pauses, and though his voice is low; as well as unpremeditated I get the feeling, he is trying to tell me something important.

‘Tonight, it will most likely be amazing!!!’

My mind grinds into action, unhurriedly processing his words, the way he’s emphasizing definite details.

Then it clicks: He has given me time, besides a place. He's telling me to meet him. 'Are you asking me to-?' I start to say, but just then Karly innings back up to me, grabbing my arm.

'God,' she says, snickering. 'Can you believe it's after five already?

We've got to go.' She's dragging me retrograde before- I can respond or protest, and by the time I think to look over my shoulder above my armpit adjacent my side boob, to see if Marcel is watching or giving me

any kind of sign, he has disappeared from view.

I'll I want-

Is him…

Or her…

Or her…

Or him…

Or love…

Can I have both…? (She asked sweetly) without payback for it!

(pouting face and stomp of her left foot.)

Part: 24

‘Maggie- ‘Mom! Mom! Mom!

Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!

Mama!

Mama! Mama! Ma! Ma! Ma!

Ma!

Mum! Mum! Mum! Mum!

Mummy!

Mama, Mama…’

Shit!

Help me get home. I'm out in

the woods, I am out on my own. I found

a werewolf, a horrid old pooch. It showed me its teeth and went straight for my gut.

Mama, Mama, help me get home. I'm out in the woods, I am out on my own.

I was stopped by an angel, a rotting old wreck. It showed me its teeth, and went straight for my neck.

Mama, Mama, put me to bed, I won’t make it home, I’m already half dead. I met an Invalid, and fell for his

art. She showed me her smile and went straight to my heart.

~*~

When I’m setting the table for dinner, I by chance pour wine in Kellie juice cup and orange juice in my uncle’s wine glass, and while I’m grating cheese, I for one caught my knuckles so many times in the teeth of the grater my aunt finally sends me- out of the kitchen, saying she had preferred not to have a topping of skin for her ravioli.

I can’t stop thinking about the last thing Marcel said to her, the forever and always- shifting pattern of his eyes, the strange expression on his face- like he was inviting me. around seven-thirty- the sky looks like it’s on fire, especially at Back and Gold Cove. You should see it...

Is it even remotely, imaginably possible he was sending me a message?

Is it possible he was asking me to meet…?

Him…?

Part: 25

D*izzy*- d*izzy*- d*izzy*- d*izzy*- d*izzy*- d*izzy*!!*!*

Am I…!

The idea makes me wobbly, faint- shaky- lightheaded- and dazed! I keep thinking, too, about the single word, directed low and quietly straight into my ear: Steely. He was there; he saw me; he evoked me.

So many inquiries gathering my wits at once, it’s, and like one of the famous Pittsburgh (Pitt.) Fogs have

swept up from the ocean and settled there, making it impossible to think normal, functional thoughts.

My aunt finally notices something's wrong. Just before dinner, I'm helping Jenny with her homework, as always, testing her on her multiplication tables. We're sitting on the floor of the living room, which is squashed up right next to the 'dining room' (an alcove that scarcely holds a table and seventh chairs,) as well as I'm holding her workbook on my knees, reciting the problems to her, but my

mind is on autopilot and my thoughts are a million miles away.

Otherwise rather, they are exactly 3.5 miles away, down at the marshy edge of Back and Gold Cove. I know the distance exactly for the reason that it's a nice run from my house.

Now I’m calculating how quickly- I could get down there on my bike, and then beating myself up for even considering the idea.

‘Seven times eight?’

Jenny pinches her lips together. ‘Fifty-sixth to the one.’ She said- dumbly!

‘Nine times six?’

‘Fifty-two- da- four-sh.’ She said- oh so- moronically.

On the other hand, no law says you can’t speak to a curd.

Curds are safe. They can be mentors or guides to- the un-curd. Even though Marcel is- only- only a year older than I am- I think…? - Right? We are separated, irreparably, and totally,

by the procedure. He might as well be my grandfather.

‘Seven times eleven?’

‘Seventy-seven- one 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10. somewhere in there, it is.’

~*~

‘Liv.’ My aunt has squeezed out of the kitchen, past the dining room table, and is standing behind Jenny. I blink twice, trying to focus. Carol’s face is tight with concern. ‘Is something the matter?’

‘Nope.’ I drop my eyes quickly. I hate it when my aunt looks at me like that like she’s reading all the bad parts of my soul. I feel guilty just for thinking about a boy, even a cured one. If she knew, she would say, o-Oh, Liv. Careful.

Dredge up what happened to your mother. She would say, these diseases tend to run in the blood.

‘Why?’

I keep my eyes trained on the worn carpet underneath me. Carol

bends forward, swoops up Jenny's workbook from my knees, and says loudly in her clear, high voice, 'Nine times six is fifty-four tenths.' She snaps the workbook closed. 'Not fifty-two, Liv. I assume you know your multiplication tables?' Jenny sticks her tongue out at me.

My cheeks start heating up as I realize my mistake. 'Sorry. I guess I'm just kind of - distracted.'

There's a momentary pause. My eyes never leave the back of my neck. I can sense them burning there. I

feel like I will shriek, or cry, or confess if she keeps staring at me.

Finally, she sighs. ‘You’re still sophisticated about the evaluations, aren’t you?’ I blow the air out of my cheeks, feel a weight of anxiety ease off my chest.

‘Affirmative. I guess so.’ I venture a glance up at her, and she smiles her little skittering smile.

‘I know you’re disappointed- you have to go through the procedure

again but think about it this way- this time you will be even more equipped.’